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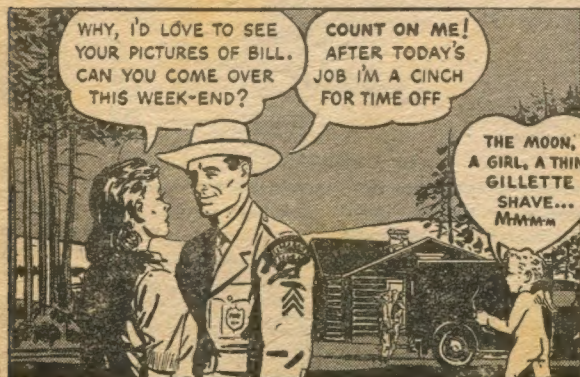
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Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 30, 1935, at the Post Office, at Kokomo, Indiana, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1949, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15¢. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries 50¢ additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

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Gold-Bearin' Dead Men

By JOHN T. LYNCH

ALEX PRUDDY was digging gold in the little but riotous town of Los Angeles three years before the great gold rush began. His tools were a pen knife and a wooden mallet, and his "mines" were the mouths of dead men.

In his capacity of official undertaker, Alex prospected for anything from small gold inlays and fillings to entire gold teeth in the motionless traps of the numerous gentlemen who were dying, every day and night, of bowie knife punctures or gunshot wounds. Naturally, Alex Pruddy opened many dry holes in the course of preparing his charges for their one-way trip to Boothill, but he also struck lots of paydirt. Once in awhile he would hit a bonanza.

One night the sheriff sent for Alex to come down to the Oriental Saloon and pick up what was left of Jim Savage, who had been unable to offer a satisfactory explanation of where he had acquired an extra ace of spades during a high-stake poker game.

"So, Jim Savage is finally dead, eh?" Alex Pruddy grinned to the sheriff's messenger. Alex had, for a long time, been casting sheep's eyes at the four flashing gold teeth that Savage sported. This was good news, indeed. Then Alex had a disquieting thought. "Jim wasn't shot in the mouth, was he?" he asked anxiously.

"No," answered the messenger. "Looks like he got it in th' chest."

Pruddy drove his old army ambulance—which he had converted into a hearse—down to the Oriental. After a hasty examination of Jim Savage's bloody torso, the undertaker solemnly pronounced him "deader than all hell." With the help of the sheriff and the gambler who had deemed it necessary to kill Savage, Alex Pruddy loaded the body into the hearse and drove away.

In the back room of Pruddy's combination furniture store and undertaking establishment, Alex lost no time in put-

ting Savage into the pine box that was to be his coffin. Alex never bothered to clean up a corpse, or even remove blood-stained garments. He merely chucked the defunct one into one of his ever-ready crude pine boxes, and, after his gold-seeking operation, nailed on a lid.

With an avid and greedy chuckle, Alex pried Jim Savage's mouth open. He was elated to see that the gorgeous gold teeth were still intact. For small fillings and tiny gold veins, Alex Pruddy always used a pen knife and dug out the gold. For bigger finds he used the mallet. This was certainly a mallet job. As Alex took the first hefty whack at the victim's mouth with the wooden instrument, he felt the same thrill of good fortune as was experienced, a few years later, by the happy prospectors who discovered the great mother lode up in the Comstock area. Gold was where you found it.

After the first blow, Alex put aside the mallet and, with his fingers, felt the teeth to find out how much they had been loosened. The "corpse" suddenly opened his jaws and clamped his teeth shut on the probing fingers.

"Ouch!" Alex yelled, and jumped back, pulling his fingers to safety.

"Watcha' got your fingers in my mouth for?" asked Jim Savage. "An' what am I doin' here? Why am I in this box?"

"You're dead," Alex answered. "You're in your coffin—"

"I ain't dead," Savage announced, emphatically.

"N—no, I guess maybe you ain't," agreed Alex. "But you're supposed to be. You got shot—"

"Oh, yes. Now I remember," said Savage. He groaned and felt the wounds in his chest and shoulder. "That extra ace I had. They's sure some narrow-minded people in this world. Here, help me out of this box, then go an' get Doc Black."

(Please turn to page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

ALEX PRUDDY, in his initial fright and surprise at being bitten by a man whom he thought dead, had forgotten about the large flour sack which contained his collection of assorted gold teeth and fillings—an accumulation of three years of honest digging. He had brought the valuable sack from its hiding place and placed it on a table, in anticipation of tossing Savage's teeth into the hoard. When Alex left to find Doc Black, Savage saw the sack and found out that it held a fortune in gold. Jim would have departed with the sack, then and there, but he realized that his injuries would prevent him from getting far away. When Alex returned with the doctor, Savage pretended he hadn't even noticed the sack. He also feigned interest in something else as Alex sneaked the sack away, and returned it to its usual cache—under a loose board in the floor in a far corner of the room.

Doc Black dug a chunk of lead from the fleshy part of Jim's shoulder, dressed the light wound, then bandaged the deep scratch in the chest, where a bullet had grazed past.

"I don't know why they figured you was dead," said the Doc. "Only thing I can see is that th' bullet that went in your shoulder hit some nerves that might've paralyzed you for a time, and made you look dead. Sometimes, in such a case, it takes another shock to bring a man back to consciousness. But you didn't have another shock. It's a mystery to me. Anyhow, those wounds don't amount to much. They'll be a mite sore for a few days but then you'll be good as new."

Alex Pruddy thought it would be best if he didn't explain to the Doc just what sort of shock had brought Savage to.

When the two were alone again, Jim Savage said, "Now I know why you was feelin' in my mouth. I seen that bagful of gold teeth. You was aimin' to steal mine, too. That gets me mad." To demonstrate how mad he was, Savage looked around for a weapon. As soon as his eyes lit on the wooden mallet on the table, he reached for it with his good arm. With excellent aim he crashed the thing into Alex Pruddy's face. Alex, his forehead

cut and bleeding profusely, sagged to the floor. Then, in a mad frenzy, Savage was on the prone undertaker. Time after time he brought the heavy mallet crashing down on Alex's head. Turning the now dead undertaker face up, Savage whacked him in the mouth with the wooden weapon until every tooth in Alex's mouth was battered out. Finally satisfied with his violent, murderous revenge, Jim Savage was just in the act of pulling the sack of gold teeth and pieces from its nest when the sheriff, accompanied by some deputies, walked in on him.

Surprised as the lawmen were to see the living Jim Savage—they had merely happened to drop in to check with the undertaker about his burial the next day—they instantly realized what had happened. The "corpse" surrendered.

Against the sheriff's orders, a couple of the deputies started the news of the slaying of Alex Pruddy around the town. Alex, whose only off-trail activity was his gold prospecting in the mouths of the dead, had been well liked by the Angelenos, and was considered a very useful citizen. They did not know he had already staked claims on the contents of their teeth, and believed him to be a good friend.

At dawn they took Jim Savage out to the edge of town and, with the entire population present, they strung him up.

The sheriff and his deputies, not wishing to despoil the people's high esteem of the dead undertaker, kept the sack of gold to themselves, dividing it evenly. Each of the five lawmen got twenty whole gold teeth, forty fillings, and a few quartz veins, which they sold in San Francisco.

Will Nietos, a bartender at the Oriental, volunteered to take over the job of official town undertaker. His first two customers were his predecessor, Alex Pruddy, and Savage.

As Nietos placed Savage in a pine box he happened to notice that the dead man's lips were open a bit. Catching the glint of gold, the new undertaker pried the mouth open and saw four gold teeth.

Nietos figured it would be foolish to bury so much precious metal. With a sledge hammer he whanged the treasure from Jim Savage's big mouth.

"Gold," Nietos told himself, with a shrug, "is where you find it."

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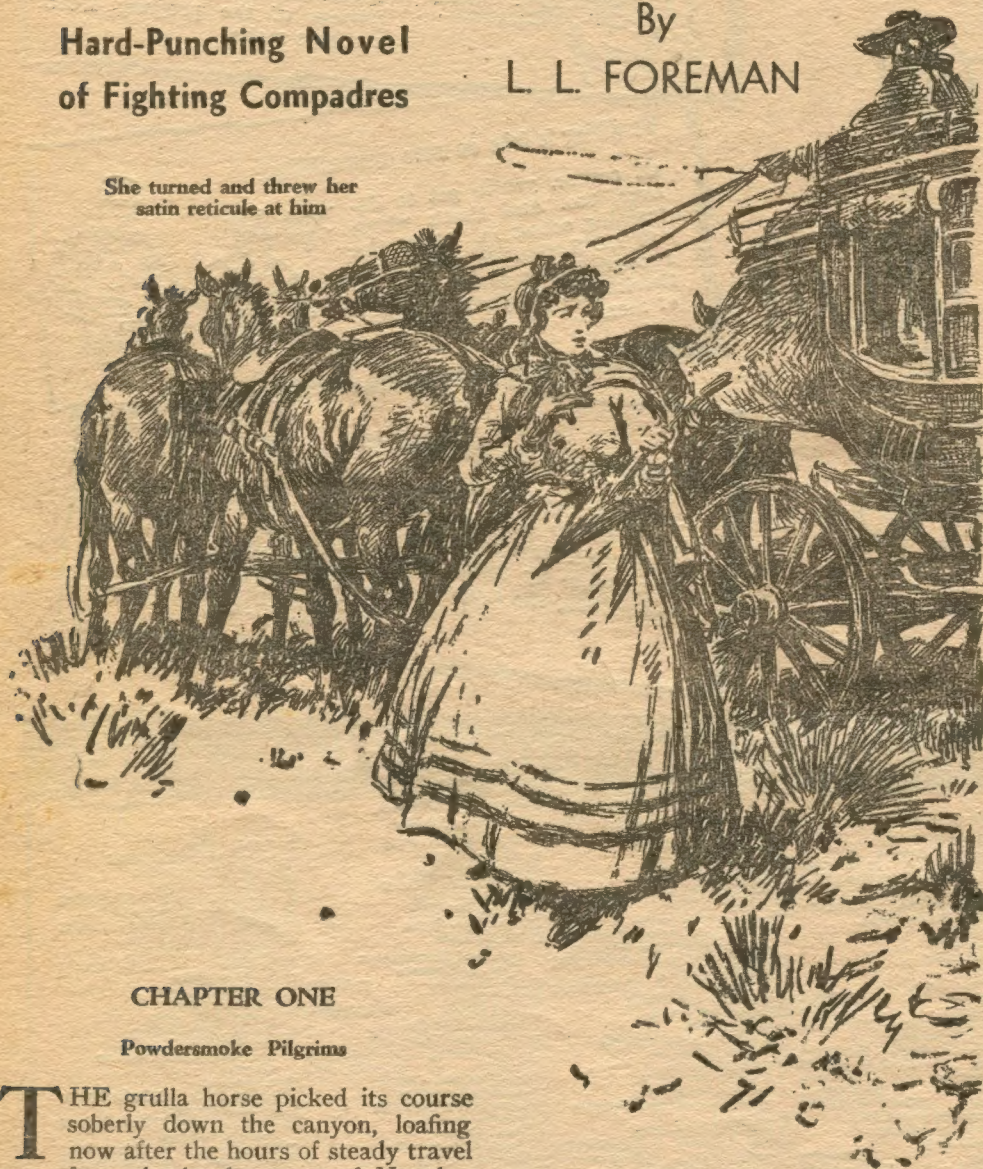
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L. L. FOREMAN

She turned and threw her
satin reticule at him



CHAPTER ONE

Powdersmoke Pilgrims

THE grulla horse picked its course soberly down the canyon, loafing now after the hours of steady travel away from the border town of Nogales. Where the canyon forked into a dry wash, wide and shallow, Jim Galway—Largo Jim—straightened in the saddle and aimed his gaze at the man trudging toward him through the sand.

To himself Largo Jim muttered with a grain of humor, "Looks like that Red Conant feller. Looks proddy." He let his right hand slide in line with the heavy gun holstered on that side, and pulled in

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Red soared over the horse's head

to wait. The grulla horse pointed its ears at the oncoming man.

They met near the mouth of the dry wash, with the blue-hazed valley of the vast San Rafael stretched out before them, and in sight of a loop of the winding stage road down below. The Tucson-Providencia line operated only when there was a paying load, which wasn't often, and

aside from that the road was seldom used. Therefore the two wayfarers had a lot of scenery all to themselves.

But all their regard was for each other. Warily they swapped nods. Largo Jim, being what he was, had no amiable welcome for anybody who haunted his trail for whatever reason. He rolled a cigarette and spoke of the ruckus back in Nogales.

"You landed real nice on that marshal," he said. "Hurt your fist?"

Red Conant flexed his fingers to show they were still fit for service. He was younger than Largo Jim but bore the signs of having crowded a tall tally of tough experience into his life. "No. It was his deputies I skinned my knuckles on. Then they started shootin'. So did I!"

He refused Largo's makings and built a smoke from his own. "The marshal had put it up to me, previous, that I should get out of his town or give back forty dollars I won off him. That's why they came at me in the Seven Spot. Might've got me, too, only you pitched in. I reckon I should thank you."

"Save it," Largo said casually. "He'd warned me, too. My turn was comin' up. An' some tinhorns I trimmed figured it was a good time to jump me. That's how I got in it. I never touch anybody's troubles but my own!" He meant it. Gunfighter and gambler, hard vigilance was the price he paid for life and he wasn't inclined to carry anybody else's score on his bill.

Red Conant nodded. "Glad you told me. It lets me feel free to tell you," he said, shifting his weight onto the foot with the fewest blisters, "that you took my horse an' I damn well want it!"

Largo's faint grin was sardonic and measuring. "I kinda had to hurry, gettin' out o' Nogales. My horse was in the livery. So naturally I borrowed one in the street, ready saddled!"

"So did I," Red admitted. "Likely-lookin' horse, too. But it was a pinto, an' you know how those markings can fool you in the dark. It played out on me a while back. This sand," he added, "is sure hot on the feet!"

"I believe you!" Largo lounged comfortably in the saddle. "I wouldn't want to be afoot in this country." He blew a spear of smoke into the breeze. "As for this horse, now—well, I can't show a bill-o'-sale on it! Can you?"

"Hell, no! But—"

"Got your mark anywhere on the saddle?"

"No! But—"

"H'm! That's too bad!" Largo gazed meditatively at the faraway Patagonia

Mountains as if seeking judgment from a neutral source. "Let's look at it fair-minded. You can't prove ownership, nor can I. But I've got the horse! Possession is nine points o' the law, we all agree. Which leaves you afoot on one point—an' take your hand off that gun!"

Red Conant didn't shift his hand. He leaned forward, elbow bent, boldly challenging. His hat was tipped back and his shock of hair flared in the sun like a red banner. "They say you're dynamite, Galway. I'm a little on the blast, myself!" His voice, that had taken on a Southern drawl, suddenly cracked. "I've trailed you thirty miles—ten on foot! I don't walk from here!"

Muted by distance and the hills, wheels rumbled, hoofs clacked on hard earth and a thin column of dust spread slowly toward the loop in the winding road. The two men paid no heed. They had violence to attend to.

Swiftly, Largo swung down off the grulla, landing balanced on his feet. To him, the sharp finality of that impending violence required complete observance, a deadly devotion to the ancient law of kill-or-be-killed. His deep-set agate eyes were chillingly clear and blank, somberly bright. Yet they contained, too, a touch of cynical sorrow. He was a gunmaster.

Sure of himself, because he had to be, he said, "You don't walk from here, then!"

A VOICE, muffled like the sounds of the wheels and hoofs, rang out below. The sounds ceased abruptly, following a single shot.

Largo Jim heard, while his primary interest centered on Conant's hands. His own hands, capable and muscular, hung inches from the pair of oil-stained holsters snug against his thighs. At no time could he ever allow any outside flurry to interfere in his concentration when violence aimed its finger at him.

Conant, though, half turned. "Hold-up?" he guessed aloud.

"Yeah." Largo kept his eyes on him. He thought, Here's another one; Another one to kill! The hell with it! We all must die some day, an' some day I'll be up against a man who'll—

There was a scream, a woman's scream,

below. It could have been angry or terrified. Women's screams were all pretty much alike, whether caused by mouse or monster. Lady, or cheap little dancehall dame, they all screamed like that. Probably a dancehall dame. Who else would be riding that broken-down stage to old Providencia?

Largo watched Red's hands. He knew he could shade him, kill him. Red was a dead duck. Too bad. Not a bad gent. Too bad. Kind of young to die. But, hell, death didn't recognize age. Years meant nothing. Time, a man-made measure, scorned clocks and calendars.

"Hey, that's a girl! Hear it?" Conant listened and Largo watched him. "What's goin' on down there?" Conant wondered.

Largo didn't know what was going on and didn't much care. He shrugged and said nothing. All too often a man tried to use an outside disturbance to his own advantage. It wasn't Largo's habit but he thought it fair enough. Anything was okay in a matter of life or death, when pride meant so little and life so much.

The scream came again. "That's a girl, sure 'nough!" Red exclaimed. "Why, the lowdown hounds!" He sprang onto the grulla.

His action was so contrary to good sense, Largo didn't shoot. Red landed in the saddle and took off on a dead run downhill. "Dammit, he's got the horse!" Largo exclaimed.

Working his feet, Largo sprinted after Red and the horse. To hell with the stagecoach, the screaming girl and the road agents. The horse was the important item. Tramping was for tramps. It sure wasn't meant for bipeds who had any sense of self-respect. Running on foot, against his principles, Largo reached the road.

The stage was halted. The driver had his hands high and the express messenger, a kid, lay cowering under the box. Conant was battling it out with four road agents, and defending a lady. Which was all very well, except that the lady wasn't aware that she was being defended. She was very young and probably very ignorant. Skirts billowing, she sped away from the scene of battle, uttering confused yelps.

One of the four road agents came swerving past the battered old Concord coach, firing blindly, and Largo spilled

him with a shot. Another lunged up out of the brush below the road, full of hell and burrs, and Red dropped that one too. The girl ran on, holding up her skirts, and there was nothing to do but go after her. She was sailing right into the path of the other two, who had taken to the rocks on the upper side of the road.

Conant heeled the grulla on around the stagecoach in a dash to head the girl off, risking the bullets of the pair in the rocks. It was a somewhat noble gesture, Largo thought, but he wasn't too surprised to see it fail. In Largo's opinion, women, unpredictable and sometimes hare-brained, could mess up a man's good intentions to where hell wouldn't have any part of them.

It wasn't the two surviving outlaws who wrecked Red's fine purpose. They, the poor biscuits, were on the retreat, swapping shots with Largo, while dodging through the rocks. It was the girl.

Hearing the hoofs' pounding behind her, she turned and threw her satin reticule at Red. The flossy bag hit the grulla in the face and spilled a perfume bottle, a fan and three lace handkerchiefs, one of which draped itself over the grulla's left ear.

The astonished horse made a sliding halt, haunches down like a pup skidding on a wet floor, and snorted at her. Red soared on over its head and landed all spraddled out at her feet. She didn't appreciate the honor, for she let out a lady-like shriek and took a kick at him, evidently detecting no difference between him and the road agents. To keep her from doing it again, Red grabbed her foot. He was in trouble then for fair.

"Heavenly Father!" she prayed, slamming him with her parasol.

"Hey, Galway!" Red yelled, trying to shelter his head with his free hand. "Come here, quick!" He was down at her feet, on his chest, in no position to be sternly masculine and commanding.

But Largo was glowering after the two surviving road agents. They had made it through the rocks and were riding off into the hills. Three riderless horses bobbed along in their wake, and one was the grulla. That damfool horse was cantering contentedly along with the others, over the hills and yonderly.

LARGO glanced at the shaking stage driver. "Hold that team!" he said and, grim-eyed, stalked over to where the girl was still working Red over with her blue silk parasol. The parasol was a wreck and so was Red, which was okay with Largo. Still, there had to be an end to all good things.

"Look, gal" Largo began, and ducked. The parasol knocked his hat off and sent it skimming.

He picked it up, scowling at her. "You crazy little hellcat, I don't care what you do to that fumbling redhead, but lay off me!" He wrenched the parasol from her and tossed it away. "What's your name an' business? You look like Tombstone Tilly on a month-end night!"

His impolite comment had considerable effect. The girl tucked up her tumbled hair, straightened her dress and sent him a stare of outraged dignity. She was small and far too young and pretty to be running around loose. Without doubt she was confused and could see no reason to trust a man who grabbed her foot and another who insulted her.

Between the two, she evidently felt that Largo Jim was the one most likely to eat her. His giant size and tough countenance were enough to chill the medicine in a Yaqui witch doctor. She faced up to him, though, shaking worse than the stage driver. "Flora Nell Campbell is my name," she stated. "I'm from Bourbon County, Kentucky," she added, as if it mattered.

Red Conant raised his abused head. "Bourbon County? Well, whadya know! I was born there! My name's Conant."

"No! Really?" Flora Nell Campbell regarded him with diminishing distrust and brightening eyes. Clearly, any man from Bourbon County was bound to be a gentleman, regardless of any appearance to the contrary. "Very fine family, the Conants."

"The Campbells are the flower of the South," returned Red, getting up and bowing, and she smiled upon him like an angel.

Largo moved off, reloading his guns. Any time a couple of Kentuckians got together . . . He climbed into the stagecoach, slid his guns away, got settled and looked out. "All aboard!"

Kentucky, he reflected as they rolled on toward Providencia, was a long way off. Flora Nell and Red, in the opposite seat, were hitting it off fine. She was grieving about having whacked him, and he was vowing that he wasn't hurt a bit. Largo reached across and touched her shoulder. "What brings you way out here to this country, if anythin'?" he asked.

"A ranch," she replied. "It's called the Sunburst. I probably own it but I'm not sure."

Largo scanned her face searchingly and Red had a coughing spell. The Sunburst was known as the biggest and richest cattle outfit for two hundred miles along the border country. You either knew you owned a spread like that, or you were durned sure you didn't. "H'm!" Largo grunted. "Red, here, thought he probably owned a grulla horse, but—"

"Say," Red broke in hastily, "I'm wondering why those four jiggers bothered with this mud wagon. Not worth sticking up."

"They wanted my trunk," Flora Nell told him. "I heard them say so." She began doctoring his bruises with a tiny handkerchief.

"Anything valuable in it?" Largo inquired.

"Oh, yes. A silver box."

"An' what's in that?" Largo pursued, thinking of jewels and money, and of the possibility of teaching her how not to play poker.

Busily brushing sand out of Red's hair, Flora Nell answered absently, "My grandfather's ashes. He was cremated," she appended unnecessarily, and Red Conant flinched.

Largo shifted over to the far corner and gazed out. "I shouldn't have asked!" he muttered broodingly. He had met a few flighty females in his time, but never one who lugged her grandpop's ashes around and nursed the hysterical notion that maybe she owned the biggest ranch on the border.

He looked forward to reaching Providencia, downing a drink or two, and getting rid of the company of a red-headed Jonah and a pretty idiot. They were nuisances, bad luck, and there was no profit in them.

CHAPTER TWO

Lobo Law

AT FIRST sight Providencia appeared to be a sprawling cowtown of the common border pattern, containing an unusual number of idling men along the shady side of its main street. The stage driver drew up at Harrison's Hotel & Bar, and hurried after the kid express messenger into the stage depot shack, without a word to his passengers.

Flora Nell and Red, deep in discussion of Kentucky, could have arrived on the moon for all they noticed. Largo, observant by habit, took note that the idling men were armed and giving the stagecoach a more than casual inspection. A shift in the largest group, outside the saddler's shop, revealed two men whose shirts were blotched with the sweat-caked dust of recent hard riding. Largo swore softly, knowing for certain that this was an unlucky day.

He kicked Red's foot. "Watch your step here!"

"Huh?" Red tore his attention off Flora Nell. "What's wrong?"

Largo sighed. He'd seen many a sensible man sink into dizzy foolishness on account of some girl. It was a natural failing, he guessed, but they picked the most damnably inconvenient times for it. This young heller was cooked, no question about it. He had that silly expression, as if he'd found a fortune.

"Damnit, look around!" Largo growled. "See thost two ducks yonder? They're the pair who got away! Those three in the doorway are Abe Shang, Charlie Minto an' Reed Poole—one o' the slickest gun-teams I know of! The rest don't look gentle, either! The skinny feller talkin' with that pair, he wears a sheriff's badge. Here he comes! Let's hop into the hotel!"

Red stopped to get Flora Nell's trunk out of the stage boot. So the sheriff, a lanky man with long strides, caught up with them at the hotel entrance. He blocked their path, and commanded, "Haul in, hombres! I got a word with you!"

Largo bumped into him, side-stepped and got his back to the door while turning around. "Well, say the word!"

The sheriff was short on manners. But, catching the bleak stare in Largo's eyes, he left an angry curse unfinished. He snapped, "Check your guns or move on! Town ordinance!"

Largo stuck a thumb at the armed men. "How 'bout them?"

"They ain't strangers. They're members o' my posse. I'm Sheriff Ludlow, an' they're on call to help me enforce the law!"

"Some of 'em," said Largo, "know me, so I'm no stranger, either. I'm Largo Jim Galway, an' I don't check my guns with the likes o' them around!"

"Nor me!" put in Red, shifting the trunk on his shoulder. "Sheriff, four of your so-called posse stuck up this stage. Two are dead. The other two are right over there!"

The sheriff turned on him. "Liar! Set that trunk down! You ain't stoppin' at the hotel, nor the dame, either!"

Red didn't exactly set the trunk down. He gave it a heave and slammed the sheriff in the chest with it. Then, carrying it by one handle, his free hand ready for business, he coolly escorted Flora Nell on into the hotel. The way of a man with a maid on his mind was certainly unpredictable.

Several of the possemen started over, and paused, meeting Largo's icily inquiring gaze. Shang, Minto and Poole weren't among them. That expert gun-trio didn't move, too high-rank to indulge in an unplanned street brawl. They merely glanced at Ludlow, flat on his back and gaping breathlessly like a landed fish. Largo stepped sideways into the hotel and found Red engaging rooms at the desk.

"Two enough?" Red asked. "One for Flora Nell, one for us?"

Largo glared at him. "No, you damn' jinx! The farther I get from you the better I'm suited! D'you realize that sheriff's got a mob o' hot-shooters to side him when he gets his breath back?"

"He called Flora Nell a dame!" said Red.

THE rooms were upstairs. Largo stopped in the barroom for a bottle, and a glance through the front window let him know that the sheriff's men were standing on guard as though waiting for

orders. The presence of such men as the Shang trio was puzzling. These men were high-priced. Efficient killers, they cropped up on one side or the other wherever trouble flared and blood money bought victory. Something deadly serious was lighting a fuse under this town. And Largo had a distinct conviction that the coming blast was proposed to include him. He had stepped into a jackpot that, as far as he could see, held no profitable prospects. For that reason he didn't like it. He just wasn't interested in it.

Going thoughtfully up to his room, he passed a bald little man in a rusty black suit who eyed the bottle in his hand and called importantly after him, "Pardon me, friend, but before you open that bottle I've something to show you! Here in my room. Let's go in."

Largo shrugged, willing to give a drink to any old coot who needed it. Some day he'd be old, himself, and probably broke. He entered a room cluttered with books, letter files and stacks of yellowed papers. The little man, rummaging in a cupboard, announced that he was a lawyer. He had made a study of alcohol, he confided. "My name," he said, "is Tobias Tuey."

"Galway," said Largo, opening the bottle. He figured Tobias Tuey was getting glasses. Some folks were fussy like that.

Instead, the little lawyer produced a glass jar containing a flabby object floating in liquid. "Now look at that!"

Largo wrinkled his nose at it distastefully. "What the hell is it? A frog?"

"Exactly!" Tobias Tuey bent fondly over the jar. "In alcohol! Observe the disastrous effects of alcohol upon skin and tissue! That, friend, is what it does to you! Demon rum! Ghastly, eh?"

Largo took a drink from his bottle, musing dourly that he was meeting more crackpots today than in an ordinary year.

"This frog," Tobias Tuey lectured him severely, "is an example which I keep always on hand to illustrate to the ignorant—"

"A girl I know," Largo interrupted, taking another drink and removing his gaze from the jar, "keeps her grandpa's ashes on hand, though what they illustrate to the ignorant I can't figure. Like to meet her? Maybe you'll find somethin' in common!"

Lawyer Tuey blinked. "Her grandfather's ashes? My goodness, that must be Miss Campbell! Has she arrived? Yes, yes, I must meet her! It was I who sent for her!"

"I might've known that!" Largo muttered. He shouted through the open door, "Red! Get the gal an' her graveyard, an' come here!"

Tobias Tuey greeted Flora Nell as a valued client. He took charge of the silver casket, an ornamental box about a foot long. He mentioned that he had gone to great trouble and expense to have her traced. From his remarks it turned out that she was an orphan. "As I informed you in my letters," he said, "Mr. Ian Campbell, owner of the Sunburst ranch, died without leaving a will. He was an elderly bachelor without descendants. By authority of the court it became my task to find the legal heir or heirs." He peered over his spectacles at Largo and Red. "Have these—hem—gentlemen any connection with you, Miss Campbell?"

"We're her guardians," Largo announced calmly. "Unofficial. An' unpaid—so far! Talk on, Toby, we're listenin'!"

TUEY eyed him dubiously, but continued. "The Sunburst property was first owned by three brothers, one of them Ian Campbell's father. They came from Kentucky. Unfortunately, I could find no record of title—nothing whatever, in fact, to show that the property had ever been legally owned by anybody."

"Like that grulla horse!" Largo remarked to Red.

"One of the brothers, Longfield Campbell, had disappeared long ago into Mexico," the lawyer related. "The other, Jared Campbell, died in Tucson. He had a wife and child in Kentucky. As the only living descendant of that branch of the family, Miss Campbell, you have a sound claim to the property."

"But if there's no title or anything—" Flora Nell began.

Tuey patted the silver casket. He sprang the catch, raised the lid and lifted out a sealed porcelain vase. "What safer place for valuable papers could there be than this? Sealed, never opened, never likely to be mislaid! And who would steal

a dead man's ashes? Who'd want them?"

"Don't look at me, I'm no ghoul!" Largo said. "What makes you think the papers are in there, anyhow?"

Tuey smiled. "From a diary and letters left by Ián Campbell's father. Jared's widow wanted her husband's remains cremated and sent to her, but he was against cremation. However, he didn't wish to offend the poor lady. So, as he wrote in his diary, he perpetrated a rather pardonable deception. He had been worried about the safety of the property title and other documents, for in those days there was constant danger of bandit raids and Indian burnings. This country was wild and lawless then, and so he—"

"Has it changed?" Largo asked dryly, peering through the window at the gunmen down in the street.

"Yes!" Tuey declared. "Those men you see have been organized as a posse by our mayor, Mr. Karl Ballinger, at his own expense! He's helping me in this Sunburst case and has promised to do all in his power to secure Miss Campbell's claim."

Largo and Red exchanged glances, remembering the four men who held up the stage and tried to steal the casket. "I'd like to meet that Ballinger," Red murmured. "Guess I'll take a look out back and see how things stand there."

Tuey admitted to Flora Nell that there were obstacles to her claim. "Recently," he mentioned, "a man calling himself William Longfield turned up with a gang of ruffians from Mexico, claiming he's the son of Longfield Campbell, and took possession of the Sunburst ranch. I'm positive he's a fraud. Have no fear, Miss Campbell." He returned the vase to the casket. "This will ensure your claim. Lawlessness cannot prevail against justice! Mr. Ballinger will see to that!"

Largo put small faith in that theory, but before he could debate it Red returned. Red said grimly, "This sure gets worse in a hurry! There's another pack of hombres on watch now, out back! They're dressed kinda Mexican, but mostly they strike me as border boogers and gun-throwers, from all over! They don't mix with the sheriff's jiggers. Who are they, Tuey?"

"Some of the ruffians the so-called William Longfield brought with him from Mexico," the little lawyer answered. "Outlaws and shady adventurers! Naturally, Mr. Ballinger's men have nothing to do with them. I'm surprised the sheriff has let them into town."

"I'd be surprised if he could stop 'em!" Red observed. "Those boogers look bad! There's one now, walking right into the street and not giving a damn for your sheriff! Nervy cuss!"

The man he spoke of had an air of tough swagger and hard-worn dandyism. Lean and dark, wearing two guns slung from a heavily shell-studded buscadero belt, he paced into the street, glanced toward the sheriff's men, then entered the hotel. The possemen did nothing, but in their stillness lay the menacing quality of crouched cougars.

"That," Tuey announced, "is William Longfield. . . so he says!"

"Yeah?" Largo turned from the window. "Last time I ran into him, down Sonora way, he was Deac Delta. He was in command of a rebel cavalry outfit made up of Americans an' foreigners, all out for loot, an' a whole troop o' crack Mexican rurales had standin' orders to get him, dead or alive! I guess he's comin' up here. Watch y'self, Red! You may be more'n average on the scrap but you're nowhere near the class o' that hombre! He's got more tricks than a Comanche, more lives than fifteen cats an' if he bothered to notch his guns they'd look like bucksaws!"

THE sardonic set of Largo's hard mouth reflected his mood. This crazy jackpot was taking on sense. The girl wasn't an idiot. The silver casket was a valuable and dangerous possession. The presence of Deac Delta guaranteed that the stakes in this game were rich, well worth long risks.

He eyed the door, waiting, listening to the creak and jingle of spurred boots mounting the stairs. It was against his rule to butt in on anybody's troubles, but if there was gold at the foot of the rainbow he stood ready to kick any old rule aside.

"Coming here? That scoundrel?" Tuey clutched the casket. "Dear me, he mustn't

see this! There'd be the devil to pay!"

But the door opened and Delta, outlawed soldier of fortune and ace of aces among gunslingers of two nations, gazed smilingly in and saw all there was to see.

"Howdy, Uncle Willie!" Largo said.

Deac Delta's dark eyes widened a trifle. His long fingers twitched involuntarily toward his holsters, then paused. Yet his smile didn't falter, and after that brief hesitation he replied cordially, "Largo! Hello, amigo! What're you doing here?"

They shook hands. Deac Delta doffed his black sombrero and bowed to Flora Nell. "Miss Campbell? I'm William Longfield, a Campbell by birth and an uncle of yours. How d'you do, my dear niece? Charmed to meet you."

Largo, who had known him as a gunman-gambler, as well as a raffish rebel colonel and a few other things, admired his suave and easy pose of a self-assured Southern gentleman. No question about it, wide travel and some education were assets to a man living by his wits. "I only learned a short time ago that you had arrived, dear niece," Delta said. "Naturally, I hurried in to meet you. We Kentucky Campbells are a clannish tribe!"

He scanned her boldly. His eyes sparkled. "Can the petty quibbles of grasping lawyers sever Campbell ties? Never! I want you to come and stay at our Sunburst ranch so that we may discuss our claim and reach an agreement."

Flora Nell proved right there that she wasn't an idiot. "Thank you," she replied, "but my hotel room does quite well!"

Delta looked pained. "A peaceful agreement between us is surely to be desired! I urge you to accept my invitation!"

"She don't accept!" Red said. "I wouldn't let her, anyhow!"

Delta hid his anger except for a swift glitter in his eyes. He asked gently, "And whose flea-bitten spawn of a mangy mongrel might you be, may I inquire?"

Red started forward. He was heading into suicide. But as Delta spread his long fingers, Tobias Tuey piped up at the window, "Ah, thank the Lord, here come Mr. Ballinger and the sheriff and some of the posse!"

Delta stepped to the door. Backing out, he spoke quietly to Largo, as one veteran

longrider to another. "Got a room? Let's go to it. You're in the kettle, too, as I figure it! Right?"

They eased out swiftly, the two of them, and got to Largo's room and shut the door. Delta passed a black Mexican cigarette to Largo. They sat smoking, listening. "Ain't comin' upstairs," Largo remarked. "They stopped in the lobby. Yeah, I'm in the kettle, too. Gettin' hot, ain't it?"

THEY both grinned, understanding each other. "I'm warming up," Delta admitted. He took a drink from Largo's bottle and nodded his thanks. "Helluva snarled-up bet, this. Looked clear at first. The Sunburst spread . . . what a stake! But Ballinger deals himself in. Then that old Tuey tarantula turns up a Campbell, damn him, and it's a girl! Say, she's a beaut!"

"What's Ballinger after?"

"The Sunburst, o'course, like me! He's a twister from way back. Smart enough to keep his tracks clean, though. And he's got political pull. I don't know just what he's cooking up, but he sure isn't carrying that big payroll of powdersmoke artists for nothing! My boys are getting jumpy. I've got to pull a trick soon or they'll quit me and skip back to Mexico. Still, I can't afford a blow-up. It'd bring in troops, big law and investigations. And you know my record! Say, what's in that box old Tuey was hiding?"

"Could be the ashes o' your Uncle Jared, if you're the son o' Longfield Campbell, which I sure doubt!" Largo said.

Delta wagged his head. "Now, now, amigo! I can guess what's in it, and I sure want it! Give me the title, and my grab on the Sunburst is cinched! Look, you want out, don't you? Okay! I'll get you out. And I'll give you a thousand dollars to boot. For that box! Can you get it?"

Largo kept his face impassive. He knew Delta too well to trust him to pay off. A double-cross was Delta's notion of a joke. That was how the game was played, win or lose. Largo thought of the two rival gangs on watch outside. The deck was stacked and rigged cold all through, but he took the cards dealt to him. "Hard

cash on delivery! That fair 'nough?"

"Sure!" Delta's response was just a shade too prompt. "I'll run back to the ranch and get it, and bring in the rest of my boys. That'll give you time to lift the box, eh? We'll have to stage your break-out fast, because—" He turned swiftly and flung open the door. "Well, well, here's our red-headed friend again!"

Red Conant had heard too much. It was evident in his condemning glare at Largo. Delta, cheerfully murderous, advanced on him, but Largo got between them, drawling, "Don't mind him, Deac, he walks soft 'cause his feet hurt!"

Delta shrugged and let Red go. "See me out, Largo, eh? I don't want trouble yet with that sheriff, and I'll need you behind me going through the lobby!"

CHAPTER THREE

Road to Death

THEY went downstairs together, Delta a few paces ahead, Largo guarding his back. No preliminary planning was needed by them. They had been around and knew what they were doing.

Karl Ballinger, talking with Sheriff Ludlow in the lobby, swung his head and scanned Largo slowly and fully. He gave no visible signal but Abe Shang, rising from a chair, sat down again between Charlie Minto and Reed Poole. Middle-aged and inclined to portliness, Ballinger seemed a man of contradictions. His sober black suit and ponderous dignity were livened by an affable smile, and his small mouth was offset by wide, narrow, shrewd eyes.

Comfortable in the secure knowledge that Largo was guarding his back, Delta swaggered on out. Largo paused and saw him on through, then started back upstairs.

"Mr. Galway! A moment, please!" Ballinger spoke up. "Will you join me at the bar for a drink?"

It was what Largo had expected and hoped for. He nodded and they went into the barroom. Again there was no visible signal, yet Ludlow and the three gunmen followed and sat at another table.

Over drinks, Ballinger asked demandingly, "What's your game, Galway?"

Largo's temper stirred. "What's yours, Ballinger?"

Ballinger frowned. He was a big man, not accustomed to such a retort. "As everybody knows, I stand for law and justice! My motives are unselfish! I have no secrets!" His sonorous tone, bred of platform speeches, matched the stilted, thread-bare phrases. "My only desire is to protect an innocent girl's right at no matter what personal cost to me!"

Unimpressed, Largo sized him up and found little to choose between him and Deac Delta. If anything, the comparison favored Delta who, hell-raising sinner that he was, at least didn't wallow in cheap hypocrisy and pious cant. "How'll you do it?" he queried.

"With the help of the law!" Ballinger proclaimed. "That girl is in danger! It's our duty to save her! Galway, I need your help. I want you to have her ready to leave at once, with that silver box. I want you to rush her into the stagecoach out front, as soon as we give you the word, and drive her off to a safe place which my men will guide you to."

"How 'bout those Sunburst hombres? They're watchin'."

"The law will attend to them! I need hardly say that your help will not only be appreciated, Galway—but rewarded! Most amply rewarded, I promise!"

Largo was sure it would be—with a blast of lead in his back at the right time! Then nobody would ever know what had become of the girl. That casket was precious. Flora Nell was an obstacle to anybody who coveted the great Sunburst prize.

But he nodded assent. He had drawn his cards and was playing one crooked killer against the other. Profit was always his motive. Oddly, though, the girl was in the forefront of his mind.

"Okay," he said. He looked into his glass, lowering his eyes. For eyes, to a razor-edged schemer like Ballinger, could reveal too much. And he, Largo, was thinking of Ballinger, dead, of Deac Delta, dead and of Flora Nell and the rich Sunburst prize.

"Good!" Ballinger heaved his bulk up out of his chair. "Be ready!" He slid a look at Ludlow and paced out. The four armed men trooped after him, and

Largo finished his drink and went upstairs. . . .

RED was waiting, hand on his gun. "If you try to sell her out I'll kill you, Galway, so help me!" he swore. "I know what you're up to! You've made a deal with that Delta crook!"

Largo measured him impatiently. This penniless pilgrim had too much ambition for his own good. The hell with him. He wasn't the man for Flora Nell and the Sunburst, and he was in the way. It called for a man who was able and willing to meet double-cross with double-cross, smash opposition and beat the ears off anybody who objected to his methods.

Largo tipped his hat back. "I've made a deal with that Ballinger crook, too!" he drawled. "Now I'll make one with you!" With a lightning flick of his arm he slapped his hat into Red's face, reached low grasped him by his belt, and heaved.

Taken by surprise, Red crashed down the stairs to the bottom, and lay there. Largo spared a look down at him: A smart jigger who'd been around wouldn't have fallen for that lousy hat trick. Flora Nell came on the run. "Mother of God!" she cried, seeing Red there at the bottom, and raced down to him. "What happened?"

Largo frowned at her concern. "He stepped into a deal an' it threw him!"

He went on to Tuey's room. The little lawyer, about to swallow some pills, waved him nervously away. "Kindly leave at once! I have a headache and I don't want to talk any more. In fact, I want nothing to do with you! Dear me, what did I do with that cup of water?" He had popped the pills into his mouth, bent his head back and was feeling around on his desk for the cup.

"Here 'tis," Largo said helpfully, and knocked it over. "Sorry. I'll fill it again." He surreptitiously filled it from the bottle in his pocket and put it into the lawyer's hand. "Drink up, you'll soon feel better!"

The pills were melting in Tuey's mouth. He drank hastily and deeply to wash them down. The next instant he let out a strangled whoop, hurled the cup at Largo and went stampeding off in search of water and probably a pistol. Largo left soon after, the silver casket under his

arm and a knob on his brow from the cup.

Red Conant lay mumbling dazedly on the lobby floor, Flora Nell fussing over him. Largo poked his head out through the front entrance and took stock of the street. The stagecoach waited out front with a fresh team hitched up ready, pointed south. Sheriff Ludlow and the Shang squad, and half a dozen others, were idling near a string of saddled horses outside the livery, but the rest of the possemen were nowhere in sight.

Deac Delta hadn't yet had time to return from the Sunburst. A quiet rumble of voices behind the hotel, however, bore evidence that his lawless band of adventurers hadn't relaxed their vigilance in his absence.

Movement in the saddle shop doorway caught Largo's attention. It was Ballinger, motioning to him that all was ready for the break-out. Largo nodded and spoke to Flora Nell. "We're gettin' out o' here! Come on!"

"And leave Red like this?" She shook her head. "Oh, no!"

He swallowed an oath. Leave it to a girl to get a stubborn whim at a time like this. With treachery and double-crossing about to explode on all sides, and life balancing on a hair-thin margin, here she was fretting over a groggy gosling of no earthly use to anybody at the moment. Red was no worse off here than outside. There wasn't time to argue that with her, though.

He pushed the silver casket into her hands and hauled Red up and slung him on his shoulder. "You hang on tight to that box an' run out there into the stagecoach, hear? I'll bring him along damn quick."

The burden slowed him. It knocked out his hope of starting away fast and getting well ahead of Ludlow and the Shang team. He had to roll Red up onto the roof of the coach, while Flora Nell jumped inside with the box, before swinging into the driver's seat and snatching the lines. It cost only a brief delay, but it gave the men at the livery their chance to mount and string out after him, a moment ahead of the rush of Delta's alert watchers into the street.

The blow-up erupted immediately.

Keyed up and restless, Delta's wild-border boogers were as ready to pop as the Ballinger bunch. In the abrupt storm of exploding powder and snarling bullets, Largo, bent low forward and lashing the startled team, looked back and knew that his bet was botched. It was a running fight through the town, right on schedule. Led by the Shang trio, Ludlow and the half-dozen possemen were coming up fast behind the stagecoach, guarding it, blazing back at Delta's furiously pursuing mob.

Largo's eyes turned savage. There wasn't a chance now of shaking off Ballinger's bought gunmen. This thing was roaring along just as Ballinger had planned it, and Largo didn't need any written details after he got a glimpse of Shang's face. Abe Shang and his sixgun sidekicks, Minto and Poole, knew what was expected of them—and it didn't include letting Largo Jim Galway get a chance at the prize.

The swaying stagecoach, careening south out of town, stretched its distance from the Delta mob and the sheriff's squad. Not, though from Shang, Minto

and Poole. The three ace gunmen rode together in the dust behind the coach, eyes fastened on Largo, eyes that coldly and slyly promised sudden execution at some arranged spot along the road, before the sun sank much lower.

It occurred to Largo that he was hurrying pretty hard, driving headlong down the road to death.

LIKE so many towns close to the border, Providencia had its Mexican fringe of adobe cabins, tiny bean fields and goat pens, the homes of paisanos who got along contentedly on next to nothing and had little to do with the affairs of the town. Here the road narrowed and twisted past crooked cedar-stake fences and jutting cabins, Mexican temperament grandly scorning dull order and the plain pattern of straight lines.

Here Largo considered a thin hope of dodging to cover before reaching open country. He dropped that hope when he discovered, from his high seat, that here was where the main bunch of possemen lay in wait. Along both sides of the nar-

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row road they were stretched out on the flat roofs. Every cabin was a fortress sprouting the muzzles of rifles and shot-guns, and over them sardonic eyes watched him drive by.

They let him pass. He was the lure, elected to entice Delta's band into the trap, and when he had served that purpose his end was due. That was the plan designed by Ballinger, self-styled champion of justice, and that was the way it was working out.

There was the temptation to jump off and run, let the stage go, and dodge into hiding until darkness. On the other hand there was Flora Nell. She stuck in his mind. He imagined the coach, driverless, piling up in a wreck with the girl inside it. Then he thought of Red, and looked to see how he was doing. Red was coming out of it, trying to sit up and figure where he was and how he got there. He was far from normal but he'd have to do.

"Crawl over here an' take the lines!" Largo rasped. "I'm droppin' off around the next bend to tend to those jaspers behind us!"

Back along the narrow road a thunder of gunfire broke out. Drumming hoof-beats dissolved into a mad din of squealing, spilling horses and shouting men. Delta's border boogers had ridden into the ambush at the adobe cabins. The trigger was pulled and they were up to their necks in disaster. It would keep both mobs busy for a while. Sheriff Ludlow had turned back to give some color and semblance of law to the slaughter.

Largo swung wide as the stagecoach lurched around the bend, and let go. To land on his feet, at that speed, was a miracle he didn't expect, and he didn't get it. Clamping his hands on his holsters to hold his guns in, he bowled on the ground and fetched up hard against the close-set stakes of a goat pen. The stage careened on, Red swaying in the driver's seat and hardly knowing what he was doing.

"Wonder if he knows the gal's inside!" Largo muttered. He sprang up, jerked his guns out and dived around the corner of the goat pen, a breath before Reed Poole made the bend and drew up in a smother of dust.

Poole flashed a shiny shooter and took

aim through the dust at the stagecoach. He was laughing, calling back, "Ten to twenty I add that Galway goodnight to my tally, Shang!"

Largo leaned out. "Pay me the ten!" he growled, and chopped his shot straight as Poole fired.

Poole paid, not ten dollars and not to Largo. He dropped his reins and his shooter, and failed to ride the shying side-jump of his horse, for he was dead. He fell like a stick discarded by a balancing hand, rigid until he struck the ground. Down the road, the stagecoach swerved perilously, its driver toppling out and tangling the lines.

Abe Shang and Charlie Minto came swinging around the bend neck-and-neck. Kill-fever had put a glow on their faces, and they had their guns out. Minto, riding hard, was closest to the fence and to Poole's riderless horse full in his path. Good horseman, he reined off, swiftly and expertly. But he bumped into Shang, who was skimming the goat pen with nothing to spare. Shang and his horse crashed through the stakes of the pen, and goats burst *baing* into the road.

Largo got off another shot before a goat galloped over him and ruined his aim. He scrambled up and darted at Poole's horse. Minto, bloody-shouldered and with a useless arm dangling, had his work cut out, trying to handle his mount, which evidently disliked goats. Abe Shang was pitching around in the pen. Largo swarmed into the saddle of Poole's horse, dug in his heels and took off.

Red sat in the road, holding his head, a battered jigger who didn't know which way was up. To his bruises and cuts he had added a bullet-crease from Poole. Blood smeared one side of his face, which hadn't been handsome to begin with. He was a sight. But instinct or something must have told him that a horse was coming on the high lope and would step on him if he didn't watch out. He wavered to his feet, fumbling vaguely at his empty holster.

Largo bore down on him, and reached out. "Jump 'er on the run!" he yelled, and hooked Red with his arm. Red's feet scraped the ground. But, automatically, he swung up behind Largo and banged his breeches on the cantle.

"What's up?" Red inquired foggily.
 "Flora Nell's in that stagecoach!"
 Largo barked. "Where the hell is it?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Longrider's Ransom

RED snapped to his senses as if doused in icy water. "She is? Why in God's name didn't you tell me? Hit this nag up!"

"This nag ain't doin' so bad, carryin' the two of us," Largo told him curtly. "That's the dust o' the stage way ahead, I guess. And way ahead it sure is!"

They were out of the adobe fringe of Providencia, clattering down the open road toward the south. It was a rolling country of little juniper and grass hills, wide valleys, and the mountains of the Patagonia Range piled against the darkening horizon. The thin dust-line of the runaway stagecoach pinched out, dipping into a valley that bent and swallowed the trail.

The dying sun's rim redly etched the hilltops. Into the redness, distant specks moved, and minute flicks of brief light speared from them, followed like faint thunder after far lightning by the flat reports of gunshots. The scattered remnants of Delta's buccaneer company, smashed and routed in the battle of the adobe cabins, were quitting the country, making their way back to Mexico as best they could. They were men of all nations who fought for money and for fun. Owing no allegiance, owning no ideals, in defeat they fell back to the free choice of the lobo and the hawk. Outlaws, they recognized jungle law, the cynical law of self-interest. Largo silently wished them luck. He was one of them and had been so all his lurid life.

They rode on, two men on one horse. In the valley they came on the stagecoach, halted, the tired team quietly grazing. The coach was empty, the doors open. Largo said, "Delta an' the rest of his boys were comin' in from the Sunburst. Just about time. They met the stage. You guess what happened then, Red! Yeah, they took her an' the box, an' turned back! Well? You wanta go on?"

"I'm going on till I find her!" Red answered.

Largo grinned. His grin was hard and twisty, as cynical as that of any wild border booger. "Then let's get to it!"

Neither knew exactly the location of the Sunburst ranchhouse, and darkness made it impossible to track the hoofprints they found around the stagecoach. All they knew was the general direction, and they branched off the road onto the trail that seemed most likely. Red, who had dropped his gun somewhere, wanted to borrow one of Largo's, but Largo barked, "Nothin' doin'! In the short time I've known you I've seen you lose a horse, your gun, an' a stagecoach, not to mention your senses—such as they are! You ain't gettin' extravagant with any property o' mine!"

Lighted windows finally came into view, then the dark outlines of buildings. Largo reined into the yard and Red slid warily to the ground. There was no certainty that this was the Sunburst until a voice purred pleasantly, "*Mil buenos venidos!* Go on into the house. Coffee'll be ready soon. We only just got in, ourselves. One of the boys will take care of your horse."

"*Gracias*, Deac," replied Largo, and walked with Red into the house. It would have been a breach of etiquette to pause and peer around to see where Delta was and whether he had a gun out.

They found Flora Nell sitting in the main room, pale and alarmed. She jumped up joyfully at sight of them and Red strode quickly to her. Deac Delta, stepping lightly in after them, shouldered him aside. "Your attentions to my niece do not meet with my approval!" he remarked. "Sit down and be still!"

HE GLANCED studiously at Largo. "What happened? On the road back to town we met that stagecoach running wild. And heavy shooting was going on somewhere. Now you turn up with this jigger. He's all bloodied, and it's plain you've both been in a fight! I don't like the way you prowled up without hailing the house, either! Are you out to cross me up?"

Largo lit a cigarette from a heavy brass candelabra on the mantel, lifting it off to do so. It held seven large candles, and it would have been simple to drop it and

put the room into darkness. But Delta stood close by the girl, alertly watching his every move. "You're done crossed, Deac! How many men you got?"

"Here? Four."

"An' that's all!" Largo replaced the candelabra. "The sheriff's hotshots pulled a play on your bunch an' it was a pip! Your gang is busted. They've lit a shuck for Mexico, what's left. You better do the same before Ballinger comes callin' with forty men behind him!"

Delta laughed softly. "Now, now, Largo! I could easier believe that Kentucky has jumped north and the Campbells are coming with bagpipes!" He slapped the silver casket that stood on the table. "Look, I've got what I want! I'm fixed pretty! As long as I've got the ranch and the title, a thousand lawyers can't win it for anybody else! But because I like her, I'm going to give Flora Nell a share to settle her claim."

He was high-spirited with triumph. "Maybe," he jibed, "it's you who better light out for Mexico! My boys'll be coming in any minute, full of vinegar, and they don't like anybody casting aspersions on their fighting ability! Say, how d'you open this box?"

"There's a catch in it," Largo answered, and again considered the candelabra. He thought of Deac's four men. One was in the kitchen. The other three were probably right outside, ready to jump in if needed. Not that Deac needed gunhelp. Largo, fast and accurate as he was, had no illusions that he could shade him.

One of them called from outside, "Here comes the bunch!"

"You see?" Delta chuckled.

"You grinnin' gopher!" Largo snarled. "It's the Ballinger mob!"

Delta eyed him uncertainly. "By God, I think you really believe it! Hey, fellows, you sure it's our bunch?"

"Well, I ain't got cat's eyes," cracked one, "but there ain't a doubt in my mind! They're ridin' mighty fast."

"Brother, listen to 'em come!" put in another. "Say, they ain't swingin' off to the corrals. They're comin' straight up to the house. Somethin's wrong! Say—"

A brief flurry of shots smashed down all further talk, and horsemen pounded around the house. The kitchen door

crashed open. Two shots sounded there, followed by a tinny clatter and the thud of a man falling, and after that the voice of Abe Shang. "I always wanted to kill me a cook!"

DEAC DELTA wasn't smiling now. His triumph had tumbled abruptly into catastrophe. But nothing could crack his nerve. He and Largo had their guns out and were slowly circling, watching the doors and windows. Red, unarmed, edged toward the candles.

Somewhere outside, Sheriff Ludlow rapped, "Leave the light be, you! All right, hombres, we see you! Lay the guns on the table or we'll blast that room so ragged a fly couldn't live in it!"

Delta looked at Flora Nell and then at Largo, who nodded bleakly. "I guess they would, at that! Damn you, Deac, I told you!" They slammed their guns reluctantly on the table, alongside the silver casket, and stepped back. It was the first time either had ever done that, and they glanced again at Flora Nell. But for her they would have staked all on gunfighting luck, and gone out shooting.

Faces loomed up at the windows. Ludlow entered the front door, a dozen men behind him. Shang came in from the kitchen. He was scratched and bruised from his encounter with the goat pen, but his eyes were coldly joyous. He shoved a cocked gun at Largo's waist and said tonelessly, "I'm goin' to spend four shells to kill you! Two for Poole, one for Minto, one for me!"

"Better wait till the boss comes in," Ludlow advised. "He might want a word with him first. Here he is now."

Ballinger made something of a grand entrance, pausing in the doorway and surveying everything before advancing majestically to the table. "Quite right," he commended Ludlow. "Justice must be served, but always—er—in the garment of legality! An appeal has gone forth to the governor, from the citizens of Providencia, requesting him to order troops here at once to restore order and make a thorough investigation!"

The news caused some uneasy muttering among the mob. He raised a hand for silence. "When they get here, bear in mind that you are possemen. However,

if some of you—ahem—decide that you have business elsewhere, this is a good time to attend to it, for I expect to cut down the payroll of my organization very shortly!"

With all his ponderous dignity and mouthy hypocrisy, he was shrewdly efficient and knew how to play all ends toward the middle. He dropped his hand onto the silver casket and smiled affably at Flora Nell. "The investigation will show that Miss Campbell arrived with documents that substantiate her claim. Sheriff, you will bear witness to that. Whereupon these ruffians, becoming desperate, resorted to bloodshed in their evil effort to rob a helpless girl of her inheritance!"

The big wind-bellied hombre who might, in a tight, pass himself off for a sky-pilot, could chew the rag with the best of them when he felt like it.

"Why, you—" Red began, and promptly got punched by Ludlow. That smash in the mouth hurt like hell.

"But help was at hand!" Ballinger proclaimed. "We men of Providencia rose up around our sheriff, and under his sturdy and able leadership we rushed to

the aid of that innocent girl, smashed the black-hearted bandits and sent their remnants scuttling!" He took a satisfied gulp of air, and added matter-of-factly, "As for these three ringleaders, I expect them to try to escape while you're taking them in to the jail. Don't you, Shang?"

Shang's nod was slow and positive. "Dead sure of it!"

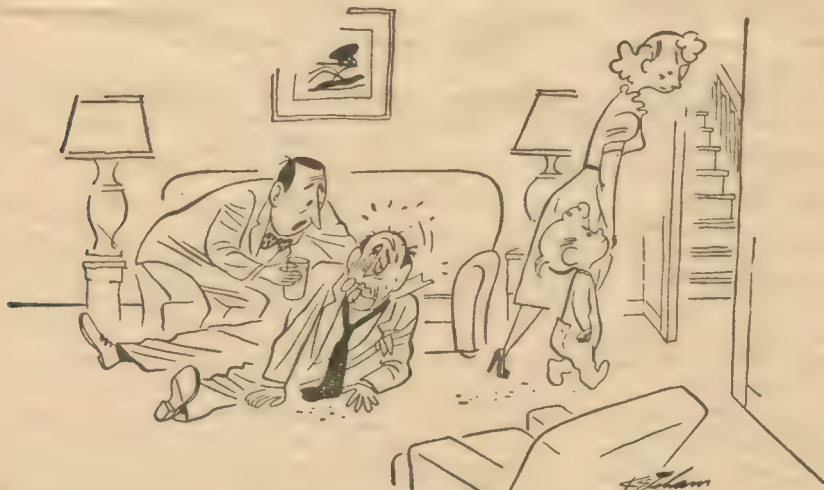
Ballinger turned on his smile again for Flora Nell, but the chill in his narrow eyes made her shrink back. "And now, my dear Miss Campbell, let us decide what next can be done for you, eh?"

"I—I don't want—" she began.

"Of course you don't," he broke in benignly. "You're terribly upset by all that has happened, and you don't want to stay here. You realize, too, that you couldn't possibly manage this ranch, don't you? So I propose to pay your expenses back to Kentucky, plus a thousand dollars. In return, you can sign your claim over to me in a legal contract, and I shall take care of everything for you!"

"Oh, but—"

"It's to your best interest, my dear. I'm sure you can be convinced of that." Ballinger's eyes sharpened to an unblink-



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ing stare. "I'm sure you can be persuaded to see it in that light!"

LUDLOW and Shang made motions to the mob. They all began filing out, hustling Largo, Delta and Red along with them. Red struggled furiously, and Delta's face had become a pale mask of savage rage and regret.

Largo turned at the door, disregarding Shang's shove. "You're no gambler, Ballinger!" he remarked. "In stud poker it's a pretty good rule to look at your hole card before bettin' so big. Deac, he was cocksure, too. That's how he lost out! He had that box, there. Now you've got it. But what's in it?"

First frowning, Ballinger suddenly looked startled. Picking up the silver casket, he fumbled impatiently with the catch and finally got the lid open. His face grayed. Dismay pinched his mouth in and he mumbled, "It's—it's empty!"

He let the box fall. His right hand dug under his coat, came out, and over a bulldog pistol he glared at Largo like a madman.

"If I'm killed," said Largo, "I wonder who'll ever find that china pot?"

"Where is it?" Ballinger grated. "Quick, or I shoot!"

Largo shook his head. "You won't shoot. I'm not worryin' you will, long's nobody but me knows where that china pot is—an' I know because I put it there! No, you're goin' to give me a better deal than that! The thing's no good to me, but it is to you. What's the offer?"

Ballinger sat down slowly, his color returning and shrewdness replacing the glare in his eyes. "Your life!" He motioned to the men to bring back Delta and Red.

"Well, now, that's something that's no good to you, but it is to me!" Largo observed. "What else?"

Ballinger nodded toward Delta and Red. "Their lives."

Largo shrugged. "No good to you or me! How 'bout the girl?"

"No!" The answer was definite and final.

"All right." Largo didn't try to press the point. "I'll take cash in place of her. Thousand dollars. Now I want my horse."

"Shang will go with you."

"Nothin' doin'! I'll go alone, an' nobody's to follow me. An' kindly tell your mob not to lay for me when I get back! If they're in sight, I'll stay clear, believe me! I want my guns, too."

"They'll be here on the table when you get back, and the money as well." Lacking the false smile, Ballinger's face was flinty and brutal. "If you're not back in two hours I'll post a private reward on you that'll set every manhunter in the country on your trail! You wouldn't get a hundred miles in any direction!"

"I'll be back, don't worry. It's not every day I stand to collect a thousand dollars for a short ride!" Largo eyed his guns regretfully, and left.

IT WAS a short ride, but it took up most of the two hours given him. The Sunburst had much the same appearance as when he and Red had ridden up to it. Lights showed from the windows of the main room, the yard seemed empty, and over all hung a peaceful hush.

Largo trusted the empty hush no more than he did Ballinger's mob, and he speculated on how far off they might be waiting. Not too far, that was a safe bet. They had unsaddled their horses and run them into the corral, he knew, for he rode by there coming in. So most of them were probably in the big bunkhouse, waiting in the dark.

This deal would have to be handled fast. At that, it hung on such flimsy chances he would have called anybody a crazy suicide hunter for trying it. His senses twanged, warning him insistently that eyes were silently fastened on him, that the place was a trap, staged and set for him. He touched the porcelain vase under his shirt, and rode up to the house and dismounted. Tying the split reins and looping them over the end porch-rail, he breathed a gambler's prayer and paced swiftly into the house.

As soon as he entered the main room he was aware of how carefully and thoroughly the staging had been set. There was Flora Neil, quiet as a threat-frightened child. And Delta and Red, their backs toward the open kitchen door, mute and stiff, like mummies pushed into position. Delta rolled his eyes quickly in eloquent warning, and Largo caught his message. The kitchen wasn't empty. Most

likely it was Shang and Ludlow who were in there.

On the table still lay the four guns, Largo's and Delta's, and a packet of bills. The guns hadn't been unloaded. The dull gray noses of the bullets were visible in the cylinders. But they had been turned around so that Ballinger, on the other side of the table, could pick up any one of them in an instant.

It was all too elaborately arranged. It reeked of overdone hypocrisy. The trap would be sprung as soon as Ballinger got his hands on the porcelain vase. That would be the signal. Largo sent a glance at the candelabra on the mantel. It was behind Ballinger. Two of the candles had burned out. The others were getting low.

Ballinger stood smiling in his best platform manner, one hand resting on the table conveniently near the guns, the other on his portly waist, as if about to deliver a speech. "Ah, there, Galway! Got back all right, I see. Knew you would, of course. You gave your word, and I'm sure we can trust each other. Yes, indeed! Did you—ahem—get what you went for?"

"Sure did!" Largo drew it from under his shirt and tossed it over.

It was a fast and tricky toss, too much for a stout man. The painted porcelain vase spun over Ballinger's head before he knew it. He reached clumsily, missed, cursed, and turned and lunged after it. It struck the chimney above the mantel, above the lighted candelabra. It smashed to bits. And instantly a sheet of bluish fire burst from the candelabra, and spread up and down the fireplace and half across the floor. Ballinger rocked back, covering his face and howling, spattered with flame.

LARGO and Delta, both diving at the table for their guns, hit it so hard it skidded with them, slammed into Ballinger and rammed him back where he'd come from. Largo got his guns and jumped clear, but Delta's slid on before he could grab them and fell over onto the floor somewhere near Ballinger's feet. Without hesitation Delta hurled the table aside and reached into the blaze. He came up with his guns flickering blue fire and his sleeves smoking, and as he shoved the howling Ballinger out of his way they exploded in his hands. Every load went off without a trigger pulled, and Ballinger got the full benefit of them, but Delta's face twitched with pain.

Red had better luck. Without any gun to dive for, he gave his time to the kitchen door. The flaming holocaust astounded him as much as it did anybody, but he was as quick as Delta to take advantage of it. He ducked low and spun around, and when Ludlow and Shang came plunging out of the dark kitchen into the glare of the room, he butted Ludlow in the belt.

He couldn't have used his head better, for Shang was firing as he came in. Largo cut loose at the kitchen door without worrying too much about Red being in the way. Red and Ludlow tangled together on the floor, and Shang bent behind them and took aim at Largo.

Delta flung his shattered, useless guns at Shang and rushed at him. Shang shifted aim, and in that split second Largo nailed him and shouted, "Get his guns, Deac, an' let's go!"

Delta's burned and broken fingers wouldn't handle more than one of Shang's big guns. Clutching that one in both hands, he pointed it down at Ludlow and pulled the trigger, and Red reared off with



the sheriff's weapons and got to Flora Nell.

Largo headed out. He found his horse scaredly fighting to break away. He hooked hold of its reins, and under its arched neck he fired at men coming on the run from the big bunkhouse. "I stashed three saddled nags back down the trail a little way," he said hurriedly to Deac and Red. "Borrowed 'em off the street in town. You'll have to make it to 'em afoot. Stay off the trail an' keep to the dark! I'll try to cover for you!"

Deac crouched against the corner of the porch. Somehow, with his crippled hands, he raised Shang's gun and hammered it empty at the oncoming men. Four tumbled. The mass wavered and veered around the back of the house to come up behind cover.

"Guess I'm satisfied to go now!" Deac muttered, and darted after Flora Nell and Red. "Luck to you, Largo!"

Largo swung into the saddle and took off around the house. He hit the mob in the rear with two shots, and led them after him in a chase to the bunkhouse and put it behind him. Flames were breaking through one side of the house and he didn't aim to get caught in their light.

The enraged men bawled confused arguments and queries at one another, none having a clear idea of how things stood. In their certainty that Ludlow and Shang would be more than able to carry out Ballinger's orders, some had turned in for the night and now were running around in their underwear, swapping shots with a hide-and-seek horseman while the house burned.

From behind the bunkhouse Largo made a dead run to the corrals. The penned horses of the mob, already made nervous by noise and fire, and uneasy in strange surroundings, stood like startled deer watching him suspiciously. He hauled in at the pole gate and kicked the poles down. The horses snorted and retreated as far as they could get. He rode in at them, raised a squawl and they beat dust.

Around the corral they thundered in a packed bunch, Largo squawling after them. The leaders accepted the invitation of the open gate and led a wild stampede out into the night and yonderly.

Largo was last to quit the corral. He left fast through the boiling dust and kept right on going, away from the Sunburst, the burning house and a bunch of men trying to catch spooked horses on foot in the dark. If those so-called possemen hadn't been riled up before, they sure would be now.

THEY halted on the stageroad to Tucson, three battered, hard-worn men, and a tired girl from Kentucky.

"Anybody," Largo remarked, "can go on to Tucson who wants to. As for me, I expect to be a mite town-shy for a while! You, Deac?"

Deac Delta shrugged and said nothing, gazing down at his bandaged hands.

Red took Flora Nell's hand. "Doesn't matter much where we go. We're broke."

Delta raised his eyes. Wearily, listlessly, he said, "I sold some Sunburst cows. Your cows, Flora Nell, not mine. Bill Longfield was in my bunch down in Sonora. He told me all about himself. He was the son of Longfield Campbell, and talked of coming up some day to see if he was entitled to a share in the Sunburst. He'd dropped the Campbell part of his name, for reasons he knew best. But the rurales got him in the bust-up and stood him against the wall. I got his papers. Things were hot down there so I came north with what was left of my bunch."

He tried to dig into his pocket, and failed. "I owe you something on those cows. There's about two thousand dollars left in my pocket. Get it out for me, Largo, and give it to her, will you?"

Largo obliged. "You can get along on that till old Tuey clinches your Sunburst claim for you," he told her. "What with troops movin' in an' all, that town's due to get more law than it can use! I bet Ballinger's jiggers are lookin' up business elsewhere, all right!"

"But what happened to the title and papers?" she asked wonderingly. "Mr. Tuey said they were packed in the vase!"

Largo nodded. "Yeah. Well, I'll tell you. When we broke out o' the hotel I didn't want to lose that china pot. So I took it out an' shoved it behind one o' Tuey's bookshelves. That's how come you got an empty box, Deac!"

"Tricky cuss!" Delta muttered.

"*Gracias!*" Largo acknowledged dryly. "Then I had to get it for Ballinger. Had to break into Tuey's room. Lucky he wasn't there! Well, I got it. But first I opened it an'—uh—switched the contents, an' closed it up again! Title was in it, all right, along with other papers, rolled up. I shoved 'em back behind the bookshelf. Tell old Tuey when you go back, Flora Nell. Third shelf, right side o' the door. Look, you better get along to Tucson an' rest up a day or two before you start back. Uh, what plans you got, Red?"

"He's going with me," Flora Nell announced simply.

"Oh!" Largo and Delta exchanged a glance. Each knew how the other felt about that girl. But that was how it went. A man could trick and fight and double-cross on behalf of a girl. A man could cripple and burn his hands and strip himself penniless. And then have to watch her go happily off with a common-ordinary redhead.

It wasn't justice. It went to prove once more that a man ought never to concern himself with other people's troubles.

"Good-bye, Flora Nell, and good luck," they said, and Delta added quietly the ancient Mexican blessing: "*Vaya con dios!*"

They watched her ride away with that common-ordinary redhead. To him they grunted, "S'long!"

Red halted and looked back. "Say!"

THE END

he called. "What was it you put in that china vase, that caused the fire?"

"Alcohol," replied Largo. "Pure high-proof spirit, 'cept for a slight flavor o' pickled frog!"

He turned to Delta. "I figure to head over into New Mexico an' cross south from there. This country's goin' to be hard to get along with."

"It's all one to me. I won't last long!" Delta's eyes were somberly fatalistic. "You know how it is. I'll run into some old enemy. Or a cheap gun-glory hound wanting a rep. Or a bounty hunter. He'll see how my hands are. Be weeks, months, before they're right again, if they ever are. It's like when a boss wolf gets crippled the pack turns on him, tears him to bits. That's me! I was a boss wolf. Without my hands I'm a dead duck! No, I won't last long. So long, Largo!"

Any man who took up somebody else's troubles was a plain damn fool. It was against all sensible principles.

Largo Jim Galway, gunslinger and gambler, who never carried anybody else's score on his bill if he could help it, reached over and took Deac Delta's reins. "Rest your hands an' they'll get well quicker!" he said harshly, kicking both horses forward. "I sure don't aim to spend all my life gun-nursin' any lame-pawed lobo who donates all his dinero to a gal! I got hold o' that thousand dollars that Ballinger laid out on the table to bait me in, but it won't last us forever!"

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HOODOO PATROL

By GEORGE C. APPELL

When Cass Barshee rode, with flaming torch and snarling guns, against the lonely settlers, there was reason enough for Captain Agar to curse his misfit trooper, whose strange cowardice could doom—or perhaps save—a hundred homestead families.



He raised a carbine
and knocked two
shapes out of the
smoke.

THE Powder Lands patrol filed slowly off Devil's Claw onto flatlands said to be so rich that you could spit on them today and grow corn tomorrow. Captain Agar rode ahead of Lieutenant Price, and Price rode ahead of Sergeant Masson. Behind Masson rode nine men, one after the other. Eight rode together, as a unit, chipping small talk back and forth; the ninth rode alone, hated but not hateful.

The men's hate had long since cooled, and now was an objective, stolidly-maintained thing; they hardly spoke to him at all except, "You're posted for guard".... "Pass the salt"—and he almost never spoke to them.

He rode alone, did Eric Ruhlmann, as he lived alone and thought alone and dreamed alone. In the service, yet not part of it. A man mingling with men, but never close to them. That loneliness, at

first, had augur-bitted into his brain and screwed out the shavings of his soul and left them to blow away on waves of laughing abuse and mocking scorn. That had been at first, almost three years back; now it was different. And shortly it would be more different, after he had finished his hitch and left the service forever.

The eighth man, Leary, turned in his saddle and spoke across the interval of twelve paces and one hundred years: "You oughta settle here, next month."

Ruhlmann smiled. "And make celestial music to the stars?" He had the precise accent of a well-educated Austrian.

"I don't know what kind it would be." Leary faced forward, irritated.

Thin in the distance was a spire of blue smoke; and south of it, left of it, was a smear of dust moving north toward it. Captain Agar remarked to Lieutenant Price, "That'll be Ross Elliott, getting there first."

Price didn't answer. There was nothing he could do now, nothing any of them could do. Someone—a man with horizons in his eyes, most likely—had filed a claim for land that spring, and had laid out a homestead secure in the knowledge that the tribes were quiet. But the homesteader had failed to consider Cass Barshee and his peculiar type of temperament and the type of men who rode with him. Had the 'steader been told of Barshee he would have replied, "A white man doin' that?" And would not have believed it and would have laid the claim anyway. Men with horizons in their eyes are like that.

"Wonder if they struck Tandy's yet?" Price asked. John Tandy had a fine daughter named Elaine who had blue eyes and a way of looking at a man that made him want to pull down mountains and eat trees.

"Tandy's got five thousand dollars in that place," the captain recalled. "Barshee'd pick it off if he could." The smear of dust had stopped by the spire of smoke and was spreading away across the yellow afternoon. "Elliott's there."

"We better hurry to Tandy's, sir."

"Tandy's is a piece of riding, and I intend to see as much of the Powder country as possible, and not race over it in search of a guess."

"As you wish, sir."

They trotted up to the burned-out homestead and found Elliott pushing a boot against the charred stiffness that had been a man. A yelp sounded from beyond the chimney, and Elliott went over to the corporal who had sounded it. "A she, Major."

Elliott came back and took Agar's fast salute and eyed his column. "How many—ten, eleven?"

"Twelve all told, Major."

"I have twenty." Elliott rode south to north, north to south, out of Fort Mackenzie; Agar rode east and west from Wylie. That way, they could traverse as much of the country as possible in the shortest period of time, and by alternating could leave more tracks. Barshee didn't like cavalry tracks.

"The woman?" Agar asked.

"His wife, I guess. . . . God, what they did to her. Corporal, turn your back to that! And I don't want any man going near it!" He rubbed his mouth and spat sharply. "He fought."

"He would."

Elliott nodded dumbly. "For all the good it did him. Barshee must have carried off his dead, if he had any."

"It was Barshee, then?"

The major looked surprised. "Who else?"

"Well, that's right." Agar's smile was short. He had fought many things in the Powder country in his time—weather, the tribes, ennui, and always the long accusing march of the years. And always had it seemed, before, that he had had a choice of enemies. Now there was only one: the man Barshee who had gathered the tatters of the tribes together and added Objibways and set himself to plundering the new range lands and selling off the hard-freighted equipment in Manitoba or Alberta or wherever he could find a market. North of the Line there was always a market someplace, with the trains coming west from the eastern provinces.

Mr. Price said, "There's a well yonder."

"It seems sacrilegious to water from it now, but. . . . Break off by fours and water!" Agar kicked through the smouldering debris and found scorched farm implements and a blackened wheel rim and

the barrel of a broken rifle. He lifted it, eyes sorrowful, and shook ash from it.

"He must have liked his home, Captain." It was Ruhlmann, back from the well.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Agar's words were rough with distaste; he was too old an officer to show personal feelings, but this man bothered his conscience. This man was queer in his eyes, somehow—a misfit, a wrong peg. Next month would see the end of him, and that would be all right with Agar and everyone else. Fortunately, the country had been quiet and Ruhlmann had never had to stand to fire; the country had been quiet, with only an occasional foray out of Canada, and Elliott had handled that. Ruhlman, Agar believed, would not stand under fire.

Eric Ruhlmann nodded at the bent rifle. "They killed him with that?"

"I suppose so." Agar looked away. "How many he took with him, I don't know, but I imagine it was several. . . . oh, Major."

Ruhlmann stared a moment longer at the rifle, face puzzled. Then he led his horse away, mounted, removed his gloves and began tenderly to massage his hands.

"You'll start digging!" It was Masson. "Pick up one of them burnt tools and spoon out some graves."

"Sergeant?"

Masson's heavy mouth twisted with glee. "Burial detail, hop to it!"

Ruhlmann put on his gloves and threw off.

Masson followed him with his eyes as he walked toward the two marked-off graves beyond the ruins.

Agar had delineated them with a boot-heel, side by side. Afterward, after the quick spading and fast interment, they stood in the amber twilight while Elliott mumbled words he had heard at other graves on other fields, committing bodies to decent rest. Then the service was over and they mounted and formed files. Ruhlmann worked his wand-like fingers in his gloves while he waited, fear on his face, fear in his throat. If he bruised his hands, he'd have no future. Yet, preparing those graves had not been like labor, exactly.

A command cracked, and they moved forward across Elliott's file and sank into

the darkness. Elliott crossed their rear and continued north.

Leary turned again, his features masked by the night. "There's a chimney still standin', Handsie. You could build around it."

Eric Ruhlmann followed the file alone, more alone than he'd ever felt before. He never answered Leary.

IT HAD been a night of swift winds and sudden silences, and in the summer dawn they awoke cold. Agar wouldn't permit fires, and by five o'clock he had the patrol mounted and moving.

Masson said to nobody in particular, "He was a brave man, that homesteader back there." The sergeant wasn't given to talking much, but the sight of the bent rifle and charred bodies had remained with him. "Takes guts to fight like that for a home."

"No, he wasn't brave," the guidon muttered.

Ruhlmann listened to this, and was surprised. He listened a lot anyway, not eavesdropping, but merely absorbing barracks talk and stable talk.

Masson growled, "Why wasn't he?"

"Courage is for cowards," the guidon said. "Brave men don't need it."

That was an oblique thrust at Ruhlmann, and he knew it.

Then Agar shut them up. He wanted to hear the dawning because he couldn't see through it. He put a point out at two hundred yards and pulled away from Price and posted himself between the guidon and the point.

A whisper sliced the stillness. "Too bad there ain't a doctor here," and men tried not to snicker. Ruhlmann had turned into the surgeon before the patrol, seeking an ointment for his hands, a solution to keep them unchapped. This was too close to the end of his hitch to let them warp.

The sun melted the dawn and passed ahead of them and showed them the way west across the flatlands. Agar pulled in his point and went ahead himself; he knew the country, and he knew where John Tandy's was, and he knew he could arrive there before dark if he wanted to. But he wasn't sure he wanted to. He couldn't fight Cass Barshee and two dozen breeds and tribal strays without seeing

them first; the logical thing to do, he believed, was to make as many tracks around Tandy's as possible, and scare Barshee off—like circling a camp with a bullwhip to fend off snakes.

Unless, of course, Barshee had already struck. Assuming, of course, that Barshee would not have struck yet. He'd have to know that. "Mr. Price!" He held in, waiting for the lieutenant to come up. "Take one man and ride northwest, to Tandy's. You follow out the dry wash of the Powder to Kearny's Rock, then bear west. You're familiar with it, I believe. If you see any signs before you get there, cut directly south and I'll intercept you." Agar could spare his officer; he wondered about the man. Impulsively he said, "Take Ruhlmann."

"Ruhlmann?" Price spit it out.

"Ruhlmann. Go up to Tandy's, and I'll meet you there unless you come back first. Tell Tandy what happened, what we found by Devil's Claw. Tell him to stand by, that Elliott's coming around later."

Eric Ruhlmann followed fast in Price's steps; it was noon when they picked up the dry wash, and mid-afternoon when they raised Kearny's Rock. There Price stopped. "If we meet anything, we'll run, see?"

Ruhlmann wondered why the homesteader at Devil's Claw hadn't run, or tried to. There had been a shattered buckboard, there must have been horses.

Price went on, lips scissoring the words, "You can shoot, so fire as you gallop." He sniffed. "You won't burn your hands—the service pistol has a large trigger guard to permit use by a gloved cavalryman."

"I am' aware of that, sir." Ruhlmann thought, In another month, I'll risk burnt knuckles and smash that mouth.

"Let's go!"

THEY bore west away from the Rock and raced into a valley and came down to a trot and then slowed to a walk. Buttes stood like stone thumbs on the level distances and the afternoon horizon was blurred with lavender. At a buffalo wallow, Price opined, "They haven't been here, not by this route." He spoke more to himself than to Ruhlmann. "We'll trot now."

They came to John Tandy's place and gave it a wide circle and came back to it from the south. They passed a boulder-built well with a horizontal yoke and left their horses under a cottonwood. Ruhlmann followed Price up to the porch of the three-roomed house and saw John Tandy come out. He had a long rifle on one arm.

"Saw your dust, Price. Thought you might be someone else."

Price nodded. He peered hopefully into the cool darkness of the middle room but Elaine wasn't there. "They jumped that man at Devil's Claw, Tandy. Agar says to get ready." He noted Tandy's slow frown. "Elliott's coming, too. Later."

"Elmendorf?" Tandy's voice was high. "They got him?"

"Proper."

Elmendorf. . . . Eric Ruhlmann had known such a name once. A man named Elmendorf had left Linz for America, years before. It had meant nothing to him at the time and it had later become obscured by other things. But he speculated

Message from Garcia

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if the homesteader had been the same man. Not that it made any difference, of course. There was nothing to be done. The name was a common one anyway . . . Elmendorf . . . obscured in the year-shadows by so many other things. By oak-polished floors and a mustached tutor and huge, gilt-edged pianos. And after that a poster on the Ringstrasse, modestly proclaiming

Eric Ruhlmann Will Play

CHOPIN

Tonight At —

"Ruhlmann!" Price was angry. "Help Mr. Tandy."

They hauled forage from the small barn behind the house, scattering it around loosely. Tandy explained that if the barn was fired there'd be less chance of its total destruction with the dry forage out of it. "We build 'em to last, out here."

Ruhlmann had noticed that. The barn, like the house, had a foundation of hand-hewn rock. Its beams were heavy, its rafters strong.

"Do you farm, Mr. Tandy?"

John Tandy straightened and wiped sweat from his face. "See that land out there? It's all mine. In two years it'll be horse-high with wheat and corn." He smiled. "Worth the effort, soldier."

Price came out with Miss Elaine and watched them scatter forage. When it was done, John Tandy led them to the cellar for liquid bracing. Ruhlmann tried to keep his eyes from Elaine, back on the porch, but it was hard to do. She seemed to him like the land itself—fresh, ripe, new, worthy.

Then Tandy mentioned something to Price, and pointed south, and the two strode past the well and shaded their foreheads with their hands.

Elaine Tandy had freckles and dancing eyes and a quick, generous smile. She tilted her curls at Eric Ruhlmann, standing stiffly and uncomfortably. "Are you French?"

Eric released a nervous breath. "Austrian, madame." He stared straight ahead.

"Madame? That's like Mrs. isn't it?"

Then Eric looked full at her. "You are not Mr. Tandy's wife?"

"His daughter." She laughed. She said, "I like you. What's your name?"

He told her, having much trouble with the words he had used so often. He wished the others would return. He felt choked.

"Why did you leave Austria?"

He hesitated, because he thought it would sound silly to her. But then he saw Price and Tandy turning from their inspection of the south lands, and suddenly time seemed a very precious thing indeed. Except for a few raucous inquiries years before, no one had asked him why he'd left home, nor had asked him much of anything. "I left Austria because"—he began to grin, and was feeling foolish and glad at the same time—"to escape compulsory military service."

"Oh?" But she didn't laugh; she was sympathetic. "And you came here and were lost. Is that it?"

Their eyes met warmly. "I was a concert pianist. Miss Tandy, who will hire a concert pianist with a cloth sack for baggage, unknown over here?" He shrugged. "So my stomach and my pride got together, and—I entered military service."

"Have you been in long?" She was standing closer to him.

He felt good, felt wanted. "Almost three years. Next month I draw my savings and return to the east, and—"

"Ruhlmann." Mr. Price came onto the porch. "Captain Agar's coming up. Run a picket, will you. And you can draw water for the horses. There's a bucket in the barn."

As Eric worked, he saw the patrol arrive, heard voices in the twilight; heard her voice several times. He sensed the strain in Agar's tones. "Sign all over, Price. He's feeling around."

"For here?"

"No, he knows where this is. He must. He's feeling for us, or for Elliott. We'll post a perimeter tonight. And each relief will wet down the roof of the house and the roof of the barn. I don't want Devil's Claw repeated here."

Eric Ruhlmann squatted alone, picking at his cold supper; Masson and the others joked and laughed by the picket lines; the two officers were inside with the Tandys.

HE FINISHED his supper, sanded his mess tin and stowed it. He walked around the cottonwood and came to the

well and leaned against its bulwark. A well was a valuable asset, in the dry bowl of a valley, and he guessed that John Tandy prized it as much as his equipment, his teams. Almost as much as his daughter, probably.

He tinkered with the bucket-chains suspended from the yoke, and presently he reeled one up and received a container of clean, cold water. He drank gratefully.

Stars crusted the skies, low over a man's head. Eric had a crazy impulse to snatch some off and put them in his pocket for luck. Celestial music, he'd told the boor Leary. A man could play celestial music to those stars, with a girl near him to hear and feel sympathy. . . .

"First relief, Ruhlmann." Masson walked on, detailing others.

The moon was a silver thread in the east, and as Eric walked post with ears alert he heard the curdling warble of a coyote. It sounded, to him, as if the coyote were laughing too, as Leary and all the rest laughed.

It occurred to him that Elaine had not laughed, and he smiled in the night as he paced his post, feeling contented that he was at least a part of the protection of this home and this family and its future.

Dawn was a gray threat in the east; then it sank under the sunlight and day was bright and bitter.

They performed chores like men in a dream, as they waited for Ross Elliott to come down from the north; they ate, policed the yard, stood stables and waited. They murmured among themselves, and looked long at the far horizons.

Masson muttered, "I tell you, he must have been brave."

"Brave men don't need it," the guidon repeated.

"It all depends." They looked listlessly at Eric, as if sick of looking at themselves. Three years of frontier service hadn't wracked his dark good looks, and maybe in that they found added resentment. Masson put him to hauling water again.

He brought dripping buckets to the rear door and set them down and removed his gloves. He commenced to knead his palms and free his fingers of the iron bite of bucket handles.

Elaine stood there watching him a moment before she spoke. "You play often?"

"Miss?" His glance was startled.

"Would you like to play? Now?"

She led him through the kitchen coolness and into the middle room. It was empty of Mr. Price at the time, he being busy sending a man to the top of the cottonwood; Agar was in the cellar with John Tandy.

Eric stroked the spinnet as a man will caress anything he loves. He placed his hat on it, then whipped it away and dropped it to the floor. The spinnet was battered from its freight haul and its keys were fang-yellow and cracked. But it was music.

"Please," she invited.

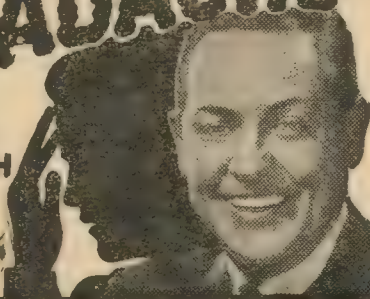
He sat down and touched the keys tentatively, fearfully. And then some confidence came back into him and he struck a few bars softly; and abruptly was lingering through an unhurried fugue that filled the house and flowed beyond it.

A voice outside asked, "What the hell?"

The music was resonant and even, drawn from the keys by fingers that did

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not command nor master, but co-operated. A last, long down-scale ripple ended in a shout from outside and there was a shot.

Agar crashed from the cellar, John Tandy pushing him and trying to keep up; men dragged horses off the picket, headed for the barn. Masson boomed into the room, bare hands gesturing. "Everything on the floor!" He saw Eric. "On your feet—the lady goes to the cellar! In here!" They came running, faces sweating, spurs tapping the carpet.

The man in the tree jumped from the last limb and sprang into the house, carbine cocked.

Eric found himself at a front window kneeling next to Leary. Two others were in the room; the rest had been posted at the rear. John Tandy stepped quietly in from the kitchen, long rifle raised, eyes worried. "How far?" he asked.

"They'll be twenty minutes getting here," Price informed him. "They can't know we're here yet, either." He whacked his hands together. "We'll give 'em a shock for breakfast. Pick targets! No blind firing!"

ERIC RUHLMANN lowered himself below the sill and sashing that John Tandy had brought all the way from Omaha, and sighted along his piece. His front sights were on the well yoke, a hundred yards away, and puzzlement brought his brows together. He was deducing the answer—that a well is where you find it, but it's nice to have your house near a tree—when closely-riding figures streaked across his sights and he saw Cass Barshee for the first time.

Price breathed, "Don't suspect a thing. They're knotted up."

Barshee rode high, his black hat over one ear. It was difficult, from that distance, to see what he looked like, but Eric could guess from the way he rode—arrogant, hot-eyed, hating.

Then he swung closer, not three hundred yards from the well, and they could see his narrow nose and half-shut eyes and slash-lined mouth. He jerked a buck-skinned arm left and right, and a dozen dark-faced riders disappeared on either side.

Agar voiced what they all were figuring: "Three to one."

"Or' more," John Tandy added. "Let me have Barshee, please. Karl Elmendorf was a friend of mine."

Barshee see-sawed reins and rode up to the house at a walk, legs long in his stirrups. He carried a Hawken .53 on one thigh. He had found such a buffalo gun useful against humans.

"Tandy!"

John Tandy crouched between Eric and Leary and gripped the rifle. "Here I am!" The rifle smashed the morning silence and Cass Barshee stood up in his stirrups and dropped the Hawken and toppled after it. His head hit the barrel of the Hawken and rolled limply off it.

The rear of the house erupted in a ring of firing and ponies pounded past the cottonwood and around the well. A bullet split the sashing and singed Eric's shoulder and he was firing slowly, evenly, finger-nerves calm to the commands of his brain. He started sneezing in the smoke. Leary unaccountably slid to the floor, and when Eric bent over him he was dead. A bullet from the running riders outside cracked into the spinnet and cut the strings and the house echoed to their dying dirge and Eric Ruhlmann got mad. He pumped off four more shots at the riders, then snagged his gun hand and thrust it into his shirt. He took off his gloves because they were in the way. He emptied his carbine and pulled it inside and ordered the man behind him to reload.

It was Mr. Price.

"Re-load!" Eric shoved it at him. "If you please, sir."

He emptied Leary's carbine and saw a dark-faced rider sprawl into the sand.

Price handed back the loaded carbine, and Eric gave him Leary's. "If you please, sir." He fumbled at Leary's holster and lifted out the revolver and stuck it with his own.

A copper-faced man wearing a looted cavalry kepi swung close on the underside of his pony's neck and made a grab for Barshee's body and Eric shot him off the animal and a cheer went up.

"Here, Handsie," Price gave him Leary's loaded carbine. The riders were falling away into a wide ring, just outside mid-range. The firing thinned and spat to silence.

A streak of smoke scratched across the noon skies and clunked into the roof. Nobody said anything for a tight moment. They were reconstructing in their minds what had happened near Devil's Claw: flaming roof, crumbling walls, occupants rushing from the fire to be blown out like candles.

Masson yelled that there were two buckets of water in the kitchen. "Hop to it!"

Feet scrambled, and Agar whirled and called them back. "You'll never last a minute on that roof!"

Someone bleated, "Where's Elliott?"

Another fire arrow smoked the sky and bumped into the thatching. Acrid white scud began drifting past the house, through the cottonwood, over the well. It obscured the distant riders who already were beginning a wide circle.

"Wet the underside," Agar commanded. "Climb up to the rafters and bucket the underside of the ridgepole."

"It may help," Price allowed.

THE smoke from the thatching was a swirling gray-white blanket that smeared the sunshine and curtained the well and left only the tree top to view. Eric glanced at John Tandy's pain-shot features, and in John Tandy's eyes he saw an expression which must have been in Karl Elmendorf's eyes just before he died so horribly.

Eric climbed to his feet and went to the door and opened it an inch. "Mr. Tandy, I am beginning to understand values, I think."

Agar stepped up to him. "Where are you going? You won't get away!"

"For a moment, I will, sir. We call this counterpoint to a point." Then he was out the door and sprinting for the well through thick smoke. He tripped once and stumbled; and flung himself forward and gripped the boulders and heaved himself onto the rim. Thrusting a carbine into each boot, he grabbed the chains in strong white hands and lowered himself beneath the rim and laced his legs around the bucket-tops for support. He started in with the two revolvers in his shirt.

The attack circled the smoking house and re-appeared on the other side and Eric

Ruhlmann squeezed off six bullets of his own and saw two more ponies flick from the smoke, riderless. The riders were dim in the sooty grayness; he lowered himself beneath the rim and let them look for him. Savage surprise was in their howls and his anger was chilling to fear. The howls faded slightly and he pulled himself up to the rim and raised a carbine and knocked two shapes out of the smoke.

He sank on the chains again, heart slugging, his mouth very dry, hands scarred from breech-blast. He heard the throbbing of unshod hoofs sweeping into the smoke again and he propelled himself to the rim and used the other carbine.

They were screeching with unbelief, lashed by two lines of fire, one of them unseen and almost unheard. Eric went down the chains and hung gasping, listening to the hoofs pass the well. When they were beyond it, he hauled himself up.

He coughed hackingly as he rose on the chains and grasped the yoke for support. And then an arrow spiked his hand to the yoke and he felt as if the arteries had been torn from his arm. He screamed as the last rider flew past, bow shaking in a challenge, and then he saw the dry shaft impaling his hand to the yoke, and his world went black.

* * *

He felt the agony of crushed cartilage as he came to, and someone forcing liquor between his lips, and the pain lessened.

Ross Elliott leaned over the bed, mouth pursed. "You were hung like a ham there, man."

Eric tried to raise his hand but Elaine wouldn't let him.

Agar appeared next to Elliott. "The major saw the smoke, Ruhlmann. I think he saw it just in time."

"The house?" Eric's voice was a rusty croak. "The home?"

"We formed up a bucket brigade from the well. The house is fine."

Eric nodded dully. He tried to say something about fixing the spinnet but the words fell apart on his tongue. Instead he was talking about the Elmendorf place and how the chimney still stood and how a man with a deformed hand could still use a plow. And it seemed to him, as consciousness faded, that Elaine smiled.

SATAN RIDES FOR BULL SHOE!

Hammer-and-Tongs Frontier Novel
of a Gun-Prodigal's Return

He spun about, hand dropping to his gun



Only one thing
might stop young
Dal Goodale from winning the fabulous Tinto
cattle empire that was rightfully his: the power
of the strange boss of Bull Shoe range, whose
single word could send Dal's whiskey-broken,
captive father on greased skids down to per-
dition's farthest red-hot pit!

CHAPTER ONE

Bull Shoe Prodigal's Return

THE TIRELESS gait of the big dun road horse brought young Dalhart Goodale out of the Texas desert and up through the rock-ribbed red hills toward the valley where the town of San Dimas sat in the shadow of the Tinto

range. Dal didn't hurry those last few miles, for his long-delayed journey from Galveston-on-the-Gulf was nearly at an end, and he wanted to savor the thrill of his home-coming.

Topping out on the rim of High Valley, he gazed down and away toward the great slab rock mesas and towering buttes, toward the hidden draws and canyons and

Hannah McChristian stood in the doorway.



prairies of the Rincon Rojo. He allowed that even beautiful Virginia with its woods, laurel thickets and birch-bordered streams, couldn't peel hide for this breathlessly sweeping land he was looking at for the first time in twelve long years.

As he started down the first of three switchback turns into the basin, he wondered if Finster Goodale, his father, would be as little changed as the country through which he had ridden these past few hours.

Twelve years was a long time; he had been only a boy when he had last seen his father.

Life had been simple then. Especially to a chuckle-headed kid whose reading, writing and arithmetic lessons were marked on the flanks of horses and cattle. Dal's hero had been Big Fin Goodale, that lusty giant of a man with a shaggy mane of coal-black hair, flashing black eyes, the voice of a mountain bull, the understanding of a circuit-riding preacher.

Death, it seemed, solved problems that life could not unravel. While Dal's mother, Clairborne, had been alive, his own life had been thwarted and unhappy. But when she died in far-off Virginia, his first thought had been one of liberation and release. Though he condemned himself for the feeling, he couldn't help it.

His parents had been mismated, he knew now. His mother had lived at Bull Shoe Ranch for thirteen years in mute rebellion against a country she hated. When Dal looked back and tried to analyze, he had an idea that Clairborne actually had come to hate her husband.

He didn't even remember the final explosion when they had quarreled, only that he had been uprooted and taken away from the ranch and the father he both loved and admired.

And then, two months ago, bitterness had filled him when, after his mother's funeral in the big Virginia plantation house, he had found among her letters and papers, a note from his father dated five years before. Sadly worded, it had begged Clairborne to relent, to bridge the gap between them and to let him see his son once more. In part the letter read:

... and I am a lonely man. When you left with Dalhart something in me died, yet I do not harbor resentment towards you, Clair. Only, for the sake of what was once between us, let me see my son, if only for a brief visit. I will be forever in your debt. ...

Big Fin Goodale, that hearty, bull-voiced, jet-haired giant of a man, pleading with a woman for what was his inalienable right, begging almost abjectly for one moment of happiness!

And now, ironically, death had inter-

vened where human selfishness had triumphed. Now Clairborne lay in a Virginia graveyard, forever silent with her pride and self-pity. Now he, Dal, son of a Texas cattle king, was coming home!

IT WAS late afternoon when Dal finally came down the trail and entered San Dimas. He remembered the town for its old Spanish buildings, shale-roofed and squat, with beam ends jutting like studs of ebony beneath low eaves. He rode past the ancient pink-walled mission with its tarnished bronze bell and gnarled live oaks, and came into the central plaza where dogs dozed and pigeons swooped in feathered clouds.

He saw the signs in Spanish, saw groups of Mexicans in gaudy serapes and huge-brimmed sombreros. He saw Americans, lean Texas-tall cowboys in cowmen's garb, bosses and hands out of the broad valley west of town. There was a somnolent atmosphere on the square. Day's heat had risen and black shadows-painted patterns across the dust. It was a cowtown, seat of a county founded on the business of beef and hides. Twelve years ago, Finster Goodale, with hundreds of sweeping miles of range and thousands of long-horned Spanish steers wearing the Bull Shoe brand, had been boss of this town and the country around it. Dal wondered if Bull Shoe was still top dog.

He tied his horse to the rack that circled the square, scanning near-by mounts for the Bull Shoe brand, but most of the animals bore Mexican marks, commonly called "greaser madhouse," outlandish whorls and angles that were next to indecipherable.

Pacing along in the shadow of the overhanging wooden arcade, he looked for a familiar face, a smile or a friendly nod. But the groups of bystanders eyed him with aloof, incurious stares, even with open resentment and suspicion, as though strangers were unwelcome and could be repelled by indifference alone.

He walked on, trying to make his stroll casual, and a half block farther along the street he stopped in front of an adobe saloon with a sign across its double doors: TINTO BAR.

There were three men in the big bare room he entered: the Mexican bartender

and two riders who stood with their backs to the doors. One of the drinkers was a huge frog-bellied, frog-faced man. His reflection in the back-bar mirror showed eyes, close set, almost hidden by the puffy lower lids, and what Dal saw of them was pale blue and as hard as quartz.

The big man's companion was smaller, rail-thin, long-armed, lean-legged. He had a swart, intense face, a hooked nose, flaring nostrils, an evil mouth; his eyes were as small and sharp as an insect's, bright black eyes that seemed to dart and probe like feelers.

The Mexican barkeep stood back of the bar, unsmiling, his leathery oldish face inscrutable with the flat look of an Indian's visage. Dal ordered a meal of tortillas and a bottle of sour wine, making up a cigarette while he waited.

He became conscious of the stares of the saloon's other occupants. Suddenly both men edged toward him along the bar. The big man gave Dal a toothy grin. "I'm Vic Blount. This here's Hipe Hackabee." He slapped the thin man lightly on the shoulder. "You stayin' in town or ridin' around?"

The big man's undisguised curiosity, contrary to the etiquette of the times, gave him away. Dal eyed both men without interest though something quickened inside of him. "Ain't made up my mind," he said curtly.

"What's your summer name?" asked Blount with a wink.

So they took him for a drifter, maybe even an outlaw? "Didn't mention any name," Dal answered flatly.

"Cattle hand?"

Dal nodded. The Mexican returned with a plate of tortillas and a bottle of wine. Dal gave his attention to his meal, not speaking any more.

Hackabee edged his thin voice into the silence. "Ain't I seen you somewheres, stranger?"

Dal shrugged. "Reckon not."

Blount said, "I'm foreman of a spread up in High Valley. I need good men."

Dal said, "Figure to look the country over before I tie onto a job." He bit the cork out of the bottle and poured the red liquid into a glass the bartender had placed before him. Inner caution made him draw farther back into taciturnity.

Hackabee said, "Doors ain't exactly wide open to pilgrims in this country."

"Suits me."

"Know anybuddy in town?" asked Blount.

"No."

Throughout the following few minutes, silence came down on the saloon. During that interval, Dal felt the steady, aggressive, curious stares of Blount and Hackabee, but ignored both men. It was quite clear Blount had taken him for a high-line rider, and had wanted to hire him for that reason and none other.

He finished his meal, paid the bartender and got his change. Then Blount said, "Better change your mind, Slim. No-buddy else'll sign you."

Dal smiled thinly. "Reckon I'll look the country over, mister." Whereupon he turned and left the bar.

BUT HIS peace of mind had evaporated along with his elation at coming home. Trouble rode him hard. He made his way back toward his horse, rolling a cigarette as he strolled. Then, suddenly, it occurred to him that he did not remember the trail to Bull Shoe, for there were four or five leading into this town from three directions.

He was passing a store whose gallery held barrels and kegs that were tilted to show their contents: Mexican oranges, parsnips, Texas potatoes. From the rafters hung strings of garlic, red peppers, smoked meat. Dal entered the store, savoring its cool tobacco-and-spice smell after the long days on the trail.

Another Mexican was waiting on a young woman at the counter. She was dressed like a boy, in jeans, shirt and shin-boots, with a flat hat that hung down her back on leather thongs. She was pretty—gray-eyed, dark-haired—but when she glanced at Dal he saw a sadness in her eyes, and noted the droop of her mouth, the troubled lines between her eyes.

He spoke to the Mexican. "Which trail do I take for Bull Shoe—Finster Goodale's ranch?"

"Turn right at the first fork going south," the Mexican told him softly, "Ten miles you will ride, amigo."

The effect on the girl of Dal's question and the Mexican's reply was startling.

Dal saw her whirl and stare queerly at him, pallor on her cheeks, her gray eyes darkening and narrowing on his face.

She said quickly, hoarsely, "Why do you ask the way to Bull Shoe?"

Dal touched his hat. "My name's Goodale, miss. Dalhart Goodale. I'm on my way home—"

"Oh!" It was like a gasp. Then: "You must be Finster's son!" She came a step toward him, stopped, still pale, still staring and visibly alarmed. "Did—anyone send for you?"

"No, ma'am." Dal frowned. "But I don't understand—"

The girl moved swiftly to the door and looked out. When she came back, her agitation was plainer than before. There was a tension, a harshness in her voice. "You mustn't try to ride to the ranch," she said in a pleading voice. "They're watching the trails and no one can get through unless Blount says so!"

"Blount?" Dal asked uneasily. "Who's he?"

"Your father's foreman. He runs the ranch since Finster took sick two years ago!"

"I didn't know he was sick," Dal said anxiously.

The way she looked at him convinced him that his worst fears for his father's safety would be realized. "I'm Abby McChristian," she said then. "My aunt keeps house for your father. We've lived at Bull Shoe for ten years. My aunt brought me there from—oh, it doesn't matter! Only you mustn't go to the ranch! Not yet! Stay here in town!"

"Miss Abby, my father may need me." Dal's voice hardened.

"They'll kill you!" she said swiftly. "I—you" She was suddenly incoherent, and Dal gripped her arm. "Tell me what's goin' on," he said softly.

"Oh, I don't know! They keep your father in his bed! He can't leave the house. No one can come see him. I—"

Boots and spurs clanking up on the store's gallery stopped her. She pulled quickly away from Dal and put her back to him, facing the storekeeper who was putting her purchases in a gunnysack.

Two figures loomed in the doorway and Blount and Hackabee entered. Blount stared hard at Dal, then said to the girl,

"Time to go, Abby. We got the buckboard outside."

Dal ignored the men while pretending to examine the contents of the store's shelves. He heard them and the girl leave the store, a moment later heard hoofs and wheels get away with a rush on the street. He bought and paid for three oranges and made his way back to his horse, peeling an orange as he walked. The sun was down and the dusk along the street grew softer.

HE WAS filled with worry over what Abby McChristian had told him. With this worry came urgency, and he hurried to his horse. He was mildly surprised to find a man waiting for him at the rack. He was a Mexican, a short, lean, dark-faced man with a narrow black mustache. A pointed badge glittered on his shirt front.

"*Buenas tardes,*" the man greeted. "I am Juan Galindo, sheriff of thees county. It is my business to check strangers. Your name, señor?"

Anger whipped through Dal. He said harshly, "Sheriff, you'll get no information out of me! This ain't Mexico!"

The sheriff waved a hand, still smiling faintly. His black eyes ran over Dal in swift inspection. "I saw you speak with Blount and that other man. In the Tinto, señor. They are your friends, perhaps?"

"I won't answer that either!"

"There is much trouble here. I advise you to ride on," said Galindo. Then he turned and walked away.

Dal waited a moment, then stepped to the saddle, turning his dun out of town to the south. And, as he left the plaza and its squatting adobes, his feeling of foreboding increased. Something was wrong with the town, with the country, with some of the people in both, and he was certain suddenly that whatever was wrong concerned his father.

He felt the unsettling need for haste, yet knew that carelessness and hurry might expose him to danger on the trail. He rode his horse into the southwest, walking his mount and watching the land roll by.

Day's warmth had gone from the air and heat seemed to rise out of the earth with the sun-baked odors of dust, pine

needles, sage. He turned right when he came to a forked trail, moving into higher hills whose flanks were sheathed with pine and spruce that had a dead black look in the dusk.

He watched the timber, knowing he made a clear target for whoever might be posted in the shadows. It was a chance he had to take, this riding with no effort at concealment. Any other advance on Bull Shoe ranch might well be deemed surreptitious.

Some time after nightfall he had his first warning of guards on the trail ahead. The warning came with the sharply-cocked ears of the dun, nervous and pointing in the starlight.

He tightened his fist on the reins, and they stopped on the rocky trail in darkness and stood listening. There was not a sound, but after a long moment of waiting, as the night wind stirred past his face, Dal caught faintly, for a second, the smell of a campfire. His nerves began to tighten up a little.

CHAPTER TWO

The Prisoner of Hannah McChristian

SLIPPING silently from the saddle, Dal laid a hand on the horse's neck to quiet him; then he led the animal off the trail and into a sage thicket. He drew his revolver and the weapon hung heavy, swinging from his fist. When he had paced a hundred feet from the trail, he tied the horse to a greasewood limb and went on afoot. He walked slowly, feeling the ground cautiously with each step before putting his weight down.

He was moving up a deep swale. The smell of smoke persisted. The swale opened suddenly into a canyon with steep sides. Through a jagged slot he saw distances framed by rock and filled with stars.

Working his way along the canyon wall, he heard his own breathing in the silence. Ahead, suddenly, was a glow; then, under the canyon's wall, in a clump of scrub pine, he saw the campfire flickering.

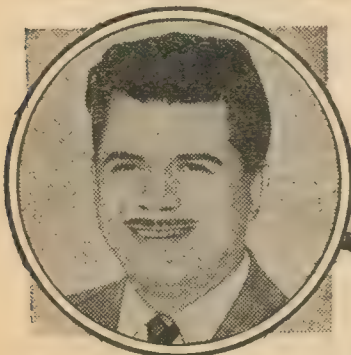
There was no one near the fire. The cup in which it burned was without human sign, but something warned him that those who had set the fire were watching him from the blackness beyond the rim of firelight. For a long time there was no sound, no movement. Somewhere, far above on the canyon's rim, an owl hooted softly three times.

With a slow, deep breath, he cocked the hammer of his gun. It made a heavy, well-oiled *click*. He slid along in the shadow under the canyon slope. Before he had moved twenty feet, he saw movement in the thicket beyond the fire. The gun in his hand rose slowly.

He waited, staring toward that stirring of branches and leaves in the thicket. Instantly he had the feeling of a man who has walked blindly into a trap. He drew back toward the canyon wall's shadow. . . .

A rifle blossomed suddenly against night's blackness beyond the fire. Lead chunked solidly into rock at Dal's back. He flattened himself, left arm and hand pressed to the wall, his gun lifted, aiming at the flash of the hidden rifle.

For a long strained moment after the report, silence and the ringing of numbed ears held on. The taint of powdersmoke



"Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to Calvert. I did. Elementary!"

drifted in the air. Dal didn't fire. He began inching his way back in the direction he had just come, moving on bent knees, crouching, crawling along the canyon wall. Then he heard a sound of boots scrabbling in gravel ahead. The sound checked him in midstride.

There was vague movement in the canyon before him. A voice snarled, "Mebbe Haz got him! Go slow!"

This was a cat-and-mouse game. Dal kept close to the rocky wall, motionless, staring into the blackness. There was no sound of the rifleman behind him. But the knowledge that the man was there beyond the fire caused a prickle as of crawling ants along his spine.

He moved his hand along the granite surface of the cliff. It touched a crevice. By crowding his lean body, he managed to enter the crevice. There, half hidden, his gun ready, he waited. Boots and spurs jingled and thudded closer. A moment later he saw two dim figures move past him, heading toward the campfire. He even heard their heavy breathing, they passed so close.

He waited a second or two longer, then slid out of the crevice and sprinted back down the slope. There were shouts behind him. Shots came after the yells. Stumbling over the rocky ground, he reached his horse and hit the saddle with a smack that settled him hard against the leather. Neck-reining, he put the dun into a tangle of gnarled live oak scrub.

For what seemed hours, he heard the sound of riders thrashing through the brush around him. But he bided his time in the jungle of rocks and mesquite north of the trail, and when the racket of searching horsemen finally ceased, he rode on toward the southwest. Along toward midnight he made dry camp on a timbered ridge, and slept until dawn.

IN THE saddle as the sun exploded above the hills, he rode on toward Bull Shoe. Topping a ridge at six o'clock, Dal looked down into the valley of the ranch under the mountains. It was all in blue shadow now, but patterned by corrals and pastures and open fields, so that the one great shadow of the Tintos was, from this height, many broken shadows of varying tones and of distance on the flat arena of

the valley floor, with the silver ribbon of the Rincon Rojo, the home river, catching the first of the sky's light. Dal put his dun on the downward trail.

The warmth of the sun was pleasant on his back and shoulders. Wind out of High Valley rustled the hemlocks and spruce around him as he rode, and far away were the whispering reverberations of a creek's water flowing over its stony bed.

His thoughts were grim and impatience harried him. Since his encounter with the men in the canyon the night before, he had become even more convinced that there was some sort of conspiracy at Bull Shoe. Now he had concluded that whatever the plot against Big Fin Goodale was, it had reached such a degree of trickery, guile and suspicion that it involved each member of his father's household; and he, the son, arriving at the ranch unknown to anyone but Abby McChristian, would stand alone. To add worry to his already uneasy thoughts, he could not be sure that Big Fin would recognize or welcome him.

Caution made him take the cover of the trees that covered the flank of the ridge along which he rode. Picking his way between pine trunks, he made his way to the valley floor. He began to see cattle—the half-wild critters of the mountain range—bulls, dry cows, weaners, cows with calves, steers, yearlings, dogies. All the beef bore the Bull Shoe brand of Big Fin Goodale's ownership. The hills were swarming with them.

He broke out of timber at the ridge's base and was riding in a meadow. Now Bull Shoe headquarters appeared before him. A half mile away, backed up against another ridge, stood the rambling adobe house with its tile roof that was weathered white. Behind it was a plank barn with a high-bowed roof of cedar shakes, a windmill, a tangle of pole corrals, a score of smaller buildings, most of the latter crude, open-faced sheds. Smoke curled from the mud-and-stick chimney, but the broad ranchyard appeared deserted until, as he rode closer, he saw five dusty saddle ponies standing beneath the dooryard oaks.

Dal felt a sudden lift of spirits, but the moment passed as he reined up at the rim of the yard and dismounted. He pulled the bridle reins over the dun's head and

walked slowly toward the shadowed gallery of the house.

He advanced to within fifty feet of the house and then halted, cupping a hand to his mouth and shouting, "Hullo, the house!"

The odd silence that hung over the spread was broken suddenly by the swift stride of boots in the adobe. They halted, and a woman's voice called softly, "Vic, see what he wants!" The voice, though unmistakably feminine, was harsh and low and quarrelsome, and as peremptory as a man's.

More boots thudded inside the house. The door was thrown open abruptly and Blount stood there.

The foreman came out on the gallery, squinting against the sun. Recognizing the visitor, Blount's frog-like face showed surprise, then hostility. "What you doin' on this range, pilgrim?"

"Payin' a call," Dal answered easily. "Lookin' for a ridin' job."

Blount leaned a shoulder against a gallery post and studied Dal. "What I want to know is how yuh got through this far with a hull hide?"

OTHER boots were moving through the house behind the foreman as he spoke. The tread was heavy and deliberate. Dal heard voices in the rear of the house, quick voices, puzzled ones. Dal glanced at the five ponies standing nearby beneath the trees. Watching the corner of the house, he saw three men slide around it and come forward, fanning out as they walked. One was Hipe Hackabee.

Two other men followed. Now the five stopped under the trees, two near the horses, three close to the gallery's end. Dal knew their kind. He read their character in their furtive eyes. These were men out of the brush, nerved up and edgy, without scruples, and dangerous as hell at a man's back.

Dal spoke to Blount but kept the five men in the edge of his vision. "I followed a broad trail from town last night. Somebody was camped six miles east of here. When I scouted their fire, they opened up on me. I got out of there and cut back through the hills. It's a helluva country where a man can't ride alone!"

"We don't cotton to no damn' eye-

ballers on this range," Blount said heavily. "My boys figured you was one. How come you changed your mind, Slim? In town last night yuh said you was aimin' to look the country over."

"I've looked it over enough to suit me. This looks like a good lay—"

There was movement behind Blount and a tall, angular, gray-faced woman stood in the doorway. She might have been fifty but the leathery toughness of her skin made her look older. Her hair, drawn tight and knotted behind her neck, was the color of straw. Everything about her was drab except her eyes; they were light-green and as unblinking as a cat's. She wore a dark skirt that swept the floor, and her narrow shoulders were covered with a plaid shawl that was faded and darned and ancient. Her bony arms were folded as if to hide her hands.

Blount stepped aside, his manner suddenly servile. To Dal he said, "This here's Hannah McChristian. Reckon you better talk to her."

The woman's green eyes keened over Dal, and he felt like a man being raked with sharp-pointed instruments. "What's your name?" she demanded.

Dal thought swiftly. "Jenks. Slim Jenks," he lied.

"Where you from?"

"Down-state, ma-am."

"High-tailing from the law?"

Dal hesitated, then nodded. He felt the stares of the Bull Shoe crew; it was like an actual pressure. On the porch, Blount eyed him and picked his big teeth with a match stick. Hannah McChristian unfolded her arms. Dal was startled by the tremendous size of her hands. The fingers were twisted and gnarled like old cottonwood roots but as powerful as a man's. There was enough strength in them, Dal thought, to wrestle a horse or steer.

She stared at Dal a long time. Then: "Can you cook?"

Dal's eyebrows came up. "Why, yes, but—"

"I'm taking care of a sick man and ain't got time for the kitchen. My niece'll do the cleaning and washing like before, but I need someone to rustle up the grub. Think you can do it?"

"Reckon," said Dal, coldness crawling inside of him. "I'm a rope hand but

cookin's in my line, too, on occasion."

"Vic," Hannah said sharply to the foreman, "show him where to sleep and put up his gear." To Dal, she ordered, "Come up to the cook shack soon's you're fixed." She turned and vanished inside the house.

Blount came lumberingly down off the gallery. "You're hired, Slim. Come along."

DAL LED his horse to the corral where a bunch of ponies milled and whistled along the rails. He off-saddled, put the dun inside and lugged warbag and bedroll into the slab-walled bunkhouse behind the barn. He found the crew seated on the bench out front. None showed him a smile or any affability. There was aloofness in their eyes, and suspicion. They regarded him with much the same manner of a pack of lean hounds resenting a strange dog in their midst.

He found Blount waiting in the littered bunkhouse. The foreman showed him an empty bunk and a set of wall pegs. His hard eyes followed Dal as the latter unpacked and stowed his gear. Finally he walked over to where Dal had dropped his saddle. For a long moment he stared down at the kak, inspecting it carefully.

"Noakes," he commented, turning and grinning at Dal. "Too good a rig fer a saddle bum." His laugh held no humor; his bulging frog-like eyes gleamed. "Slim, if you're a biscuit-shooter I'm a ring-tailed wampus cat!"

Dal forced a smile. "I cook by ear—kill or cure." He spread his blankets on the bunk. "First time I ever worked for a skirt. Who's this Hannah McChristian? She the real boss?"

Blount laughed again. "She will be any day now. The man who owns this lay's on his last laigs. Name of Goodale. Batty as a loco steer. Hannah's got him so he don't know his own name." His toothy grin faded. "Hannah don't like hombres askin' questions about the old man, though. You take orders and sling chuck and you'll git along all right. Nobody quits on Bull Shoe—a life job and you make it long or short!"

"Sure sounds homelike," Dal grunted, "and plumb cozy."

Later he made his way up to the long ell of the house and the kitchen. At the shady corner of the building he found Abby McChristian bent over a washtub. He stopped near her, staring, and the girl straightened and back-handed a wisp of dark hair away from her eyes. She met his stare, her own suddenly fearful and cautious. "You?"

He murmured, "We run into each other quite reg'lar, don't we?"

She shook her head gravely and glanced over her shoulder. Then she looked back at him. "You shouldn't have come here!"

"I belong here, Abby," he told her gently. Then his voice hardened. "I've got to see my father. Maybe you can help."

She didn't answer but bent again over the tub. Over the sound of her hands rubbing clothes on the washboard, he heard her whisper, "I'll try."

He walked on and entered the low-ceilinged cookshack, a long-walled, bare-beamed room with a huge wood range at one end, a twelve-foot plank table and benches in the center, the wall near the stove showing racks of pots, pans and skillets, smoke-blackened, stained and laden with old grease.

THE HOUSE had a smell he didn't like. For one thing it held the pungent reek of all mud-walled buildings in the desert summer, damp, unpainted walls that condensed and sweated moisture. There were other even more unpleasant odors: rancid grease, stale smoke, horse-sweated clothing and the strong taint of unwashed human bodies. And through the welter of smells cut the scent of raw whiskey.

He stood in the middle of the room, staring and thinking that this wasn't the spacious heart-warming house of boyhood memories. He felt suddenly like a cat in a strange backyard. The coldness gathered inside him, his skin prickled. A sound came from the door. The panel opened, and Hannah McChristian entered. Her pace was a noiseless glide, hardly a walk. The hustle of her long skirt was like wind in dry-leaved cottonwoods.

He had never seen a human face so devoid of expression. She confronted him, seemed to be studying him with her emo-

tionless eyes. Her skin was as gray as river clay, pulled tight over sharp cheekbones, hollowed around the straight, bitter mouth that barely moved when she spoke.

"You'll be cooking for eight men and two women," she said. "Two meals a day—breakfast, and dinner at night. I'll take care of Mr. Goodale's food. He don't eat much."

Dal stared into her eyes and wondered what cruelty lurked in the brain behind them. There was no womanly quality about her. She was possessed of a hard masculinity; her features were harshly set like a man's. Even her voice had the timbre of a man's. She was both dominating and repelling. Dal felt a sudden cold spread down his spine.

She said, "Mr. Goodale's in the east chamber. When he has one of his tantrums he's apt to holler and take on crazy. Don't pay it no heed. I'll handle him. You understand?"

Dal nodded, watching that cold face. Hatred boiled inside him. He had an impulse to tell her bluntly who he was and demand the reason why Big Fin was kept a prisoner in his own house; but he resisted it. This was no time for showdown.

Hannah turned and left him. Alone in the kitchen, he listened to the rustle of her skirts down the hallway. The sounds of this house were disturbing and curious. Somewhere a door creaked on unoiled hinges. A shutter clattered. Other noises presently reached him: a man's dry, hacking cough muffled by thick walls. Then he heard Hannah McChristian's droning voice. He couldn't catch her words but the tone was one she might have used to cow a beaten animal.

CHAPTER THREE

She-Devil of Bull Shoe

WHILE he stood motionless in the silent kitchen, he heard Blount's voice in the ranchyard. It was followed presently by the sudden swift rush of riders getting off at a gallop. Hannah had said there were eight men on the Bull Shoe crew. He had counted six a few minutes before. That meant two men had been left to guard the approach to the ranch. It meant that these two men had been given commands to kill, if it were necessary.

Suddenly he knew he was one against a bad bunch—knew that in a fight he'd stand little chance of survival. His father somehow had become dominated by Hannah McChristian and was now near death. Perhaps he, Dal, had come too late. Bitterness and uncertainty washed through him. And then he heard a step behind him. He turned to stare at Abby. She was the nicest thing he'd seen in a long time.

Her throat was a smooth brown column, as graceful as a fawn's. She whispered, "If she finds out who you are, she'll have you shot!"

Irritation rose in him. "I can take care of myself. What I want to know is what she's up to. Why has that woman got my father locked up in his room? What goes on here?"

She eyed him tensely, no color in her cheeks. "She wants the ranch. She's wanted it five years now, and when your father came down with the fever she had her chance. She wanted him to die and, when he didn't, she did all she could to stop him from getting well. Dal, he's being

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starved to death—driven mad. He's too weak to walk or fight! It's like a prison, that room!"

"He must have friends!" Dal snapped. "Why don't they—"

"People have come to see him, or did in the beginning. They go away thinking he's lost his mind. Even Galindo, the sheriff, doesn't come any more, and nobody else can get through!"

He welcomed this chance to talk to Abby unhindered. "But what good'll it do your aunt if he dies? This ranch won't belong to her."

She shook her head. "Your father made a new will. Before he was taken sick, she got him to leave everything to her." She paused, then blurted, "Dal, it's been horrible! He's weak and they make him drink whiskey and it makes him crazy!"

The coldness inside him spread. It was the first time he had known fear: "I've got to see him," he muttered. "Got to talk to him!"

She whispered, "His room is the last one on the hall. But you'll have to wait for a chance. If she finds out who you are—" She didn't finish but rushed from the room. He heard her footsteps go down the hall, heard a door close softly.

He went to one of the three kitchen windows and stared out at a scene of solitude, the corrals and barn first, then the valley that rolled away on the south in endless ridges covered with spruce and pine. The Tinto range rose directly behind the house, tier on tier of rock ledges towering to cliff-like summits that seemed to brush against the cloudless summer sky.

The aloofness, the massive indifference of this land, seemed suddenly a menace. He felt an involuntary shiver go up his spine. Nothing here was as he remembered it. The valley, the home ranch, everything about the place had altered. He found himself at that moment almost understanding his mother's fear and loathing of the country and the grim ranch-house in which she had lived so long a time.

FOR AN HOUR that morning he worked in the kitchen, heating water, scouring pots and pans, sweeping and

scrubbing the puncheon floor, loading the woodbox behind the range with lengths of pine from the pile on the kitchen gallery. It was near ten o'clock when he ventured into the hallway in his first attempt to see and speak to Big Fin.

The house was silent. He cat-footed down the corridor, passing three doors and pausing at the last. It was heavily barred. Softly he drew back the iron bolt, turned the knob.

The room beyond, about fifteen feet square, contained no furniture save a rusted iron bedstead and an oil lamp in a brass bracket clamped high on the bare wall. The room's one window was shuttered on the outside, and there was the shadowy outline of iron bars between the shutters and the window panes. Faint light entered the room through cracks in the shutters.

The room had a dank, stale smell. Dal caught the sharp odor of whiskey, stronger here than in the other rooms. His eyes adjusted themselves to the dimness and saw a bedside table, a bottle on the table that was half full of spirits. Then he was staring at the figure sprawled on the bed.

It was Big Fin Goodale, incredibly emaciated. His face was matted with a gray stubble of beard, the eyes sunk in pockets between the high, tight-skinned cheekbones, the mouth cadaverous, gray-lipped.

The eyes were open, wide and staring, devoid of spirit or personality. They were the only part of Big Fin that moved. Dal saw those staring orbs swing toward him and hold with an awful emptiness. They were not the eyes of a sane man, they held a vacancy like madness long subdued.

"Father!" Dal whispered. There was no answer from the man on the bed. "It's Dalhart. Don't you know me?"

The sunken eyes remained unblinking, uncomprehending. Big Fin was dressed in a thin shirt and jeans. He wore no socks or boots. His bony bare feet protruded from beneath a ragged blanket. "Sleep, old-timer," Dal murmured as compassion filled him. "I'm home to stay. Nothin' to worry about any more."

There was a sound in the open doorway behind him. He spun about, hand dropping to his gun. Hannah McChristian stood in the hall's dimness, tall, erect, austere, a glitter in her narrowed greenish eyes.

"So," she said softly, "you're Fin's son? Should have known it when you rode in. You look like a Goodale." Her mouth was pinched against anger as she spoke. "Well, you're too late. He don't know beans from lightnin' bugs! If you know what's good for you, you'll saddle up and leave! You've lost your rights on Bull Shoe! When Fin dies, the ranch'll belong to me that's took care of him all these years!"

Rage hit Dal. He said, "You've taken care of him all right! He's been driven crazy! Well, you're through takin' care of him!"

She gave a savage excuse for a laugh. "Don't be a fool! He'll die in a week if I tell him to!"

"Get out of here!" Dal snapped, beside himself with fury. Then in a lower tone: "Have my gear brought up to the house. I'm takin' over here from now on! You'll get back to the kitchen where you belong!"

Her laugh came again, harsh and derisive. She eyed him icily from the doorway for a long, tense moment. "I'm warnin' you, young man. Fin's beyond your help and I won't be responsible for what may happen if you're ornery enough to stay on." Then she turned and went back to her room. He heard the door creak closed.

My God! he thought. I believe she's right. He'd die if she told him to!

He took one last look at his father, prone, staring and motionless on his bed. There was no recognition or intelligence in the old man's sunken eyes, no indication he had understood the meaning of the scene that had just occurred. Dal touched his father's shoulder again, a mute sign of affection. Then he pulled a blanket up over the old man's chest and left the room. He didn't bar the door.

LATER, in a room midway down the hall, he stood staring at the cracked adobe walls, at the faded prints of cattle and horses nailed haphazardly here and there, at the thickly-dusted floor, at the ancient four-poster bed.

He had slept in that bed twelve years before. This, he remembered, had been his room but, like the house of which it was a part, it had changed with time and neglect. Now it was a barren cell that

held only memories of brighter days.

One of the crew had carried his warbag, bedroll and blankets up from the bunkhouse. Now he took time to unpack and clean the room. During the operation he heard voices in the kitchen. One was Hannah McChristian's. He paused, an ear to the door. The voices went on but he couldn't catch what was being said. It didn't require much imagination, however, to guess at the reaction of Vic Blount and the crew when they learned that the last of the Goodales had come home.

When he entered the kitchen minutes later, talk ceased as suddenly as though a lid had been clapped down. He halted near the door, scanning the faces before him, seeing the arrested, secretive attention in three pairs of eyes.

Hannah stood near the stove, her arms folded. Blount sat at the table, arms and elbows resting upon it. Behind the foreman stood Hipe Hackabee, lean, tough, sullen. On the faces of the two men lay a furtive watchfulness.

Dal got the impression that both Blount and Hackabee expected trouble and were prepared for it. Hannah said to Dal, her tone edgy with scorn, "We've been talkin' about you. Maybe you ought to listen."

"Time for talk's past," Dal answered flatly. "I'll give the orders now."

"Vic's foreman of this spread," the woman retorted.

"Is he? I don't recognize the title," Dal said. "I'll give my orders to you."

"You'll deal with Vic!"

"You're a clever woman, Hannah. You've put up a dummy between us. But I know you've been bossin' the outfit."

She stiffened, throwing her will against him. Blount let his arms come down flat on the table. He had his left hip against it, the top of his holstered gun rubbing against the table's leg, and his hand now dropped toward it slowly, hooking on the butt. "I'm not takin' orders from you, Slim, I'm tellin' you. My outfit camps here and I'll do what Hannah can't do—which is fight for this spread. There's no room for you. Ride on."

"Vic, you're fired! Take your bunch and drift!"

Blount said, "My boys are outside. How far you reckon you c'n git with them?"

"Get out, Vic!" Dal's right hand

strayed down toward his gun belt. "Take your crowd and vamoose! Just get the hell away from here!"

Blount hesitated only a second longer. Suddenly he pulled in a harsh breath and stood up. He held both arms straight down and out from his sides. "We'll see about this!" he snarled. Then he wheeled and strode out through the gallery door. Hackabee turned without a word and followed him.

Dal walked to the door and looked out. He saw Blount's crew watching him from their scattered places under the oaks in the yard. The foreman strode with jingling spurs toward the horses that stood, reins trailing, near the bunkhouse. Hackabee beckoned to the four crewmen. In a moment the entire party was in the saddle and riding out of the yard. Nobody looked back. Then they were gone, leaving behind only dust.

Behind Dal, Hannah McChristian snorted, "You ain't so smart!"

DAL ignored the woman, still staring at the dust cloud that rose above the mesquites north of the ranch. When he turned back into the kitchen, Hannah had disappeared. As he stood with a hand resting on the table, head buried in troubled thought, Abby entered the room.

"Oh, Dal!" she breathed. "Was that wise?"

"I'd've been loco to let 'em stay!" he said. Then he smiled. "You're the only one here I can trust."

A strained smile answered him. "What can I do?"

"First," he said, "fix my father some food. Tomorrow I'll get a doctor out here."

She showed him an expression of hopelessness. "Dal, I'm afraid. You don't know my aunt. She's planning something. No one in town knows you're Finster's son! No one knows you're here, even! They could kill us both and nobody'd ever hear about it!"

"You're callin' your own aunt a killer?" he asked.

Her gaze hung steady against his. "You ask me that after what's happened to your father?"

He sighed, "Yes. Reckon you're right. I'll have to watch her." Then he frowned.

"Why have you always stuck to her?"

"She was my father's sister. When he died, I went with her." Her voice came low and bitter in the kitchen's silence. "I had no other relative, no other place to go."

He said, grim-eyed, "It's been hell for you."

Her mouth drew tighter; her eyelids lowered, then widened. "I could have run away, years ago. But Finster was good to me. I couldn't leave him alone. They didn't feed him for weeks after his sickness. The only food he had was what I smuggled into his room. Then my aunt padlocked the door. She's been killing him slowly, week by week, month by month. And the whiskey—"

They both heard the step in the hall. Hannah McChristian's gaunt figure appeared in the doorway. "Abby, go to your room!" she said. She drew aside, and the girl rushed past her.

Dal heard her footsteps stumbling down the hallway.

Hannah entered the kitchen, moving toward the stove. She didn't speak again but commenced clattering pots and pans. Dal went into the hall and walked to his father's door. He opened it gently. Big Fin apparently hadn't moved on his bed. He lay on his back, blanket drawn chin-high, eyes closed. Dal called softly, "Father!" but Big Fin didn't stir. There was only the slow rise and fall of the blanket as he breathed. Dal closed the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killer's Den

AT SUNDOWN an easy wind came down along the shoulders of the Tintos and coolness rolled along the valley floor. When the wind died with the arrival of nightfall, it would grow cold. On the front gallery of the ranchhouse Dal sat in a barrel chair and watched the colors of the land and the sky blend and change. The pines on the mountain slopes turned black as tar and the canyons held night long before that blackness touched the craggy heights.

The sun was gone, too suddenly. Lounging on a cigarette, he heard the clink of ironstone china in the kitchen. That

would be Abby doing the after-supper chores. Hannah had remained in her room during the meal. She had not interfered when Dal and Abby had gone to Big Fin's room to spoon-feed him buttered mush and soup.

The old man had taken the food without a word and with no apparent recognition of either Abby or Dal. It had been a pitiful half hour for Dal who remembered his father as a big, hard-muscled, cheerful man. Now he was little more than a shell, drained of spirit and intelligence, as limp and helpless as a man on the edge of death.

A step came behind Dal in the open door. He flung his spent cigarette away and turned his head and saw Abby there, her face a dim oval in the darkness. "Dal!"

"Yes?"

"The whiskey's gone!"

He stared, bewildered. "What whiskey?"

"There was a bottle half full on your father's table. Now only the empty bottle's there!"

They went into the house together. Abby had lighted the wall lamp in Big Fin's room; it filtered pale light over the bed where the old man lay, eyes closed, his breathing almost imperceptible. Dal examined the empty bottle, then bent over his father. The reek of alcohol was strong. Troubled, uneasy, Dal went out and closed the door softly.

Abby whispered at his elbow, "You'd better bar the door. Whiskey always makes him wild!"

He couldn't see her face in the darkness, but he recognized panic in her hushed, swift tone. "Abby, you're workin' yourself up about nothin'!"

Her hand gripped his arm. "Don't leave me!" she pleaded.

He put his arms around her and held her. "Ain't leavin' nobody," he said firmly.

Then she pulled away and left him as swiftly as she had come. The core of coldness in his stomach tightened. He returned to the gallery.

Darkness covered the ranch. The wind had died. There were no sounds, no lights. There was only the high star-glitter in the sky, only the immensity of space up there above the world. But there was danger

in, the house behind him. He felt it, smelled it. He stood a long time, listening, troubled, tense. When he finally went inside again, he closed the door, thought a moment, then shot home the bolt in its hand-forged brackets. He had a guilty pang for experience told him that locked doors meant cowardice or distrust. He didn't want to think about it now.

He went back to the kitchen where a lamp still burned low. He closed the outside door and bolted this one, too, afterward blowing out the lamp and groping his way into the long dark hall.

The light in his father's room showed a yellow crack against the floor. He looked in, seeing no change in the man's position. Big Fin lay on his back, eyes closed, breathing gently. Tomorrow he would go to town for the doctor and settle this ghastly uncertainty about the old man's sanity.

There was a sliver of illumination beneath Hannah McChristian's door but none under Abby's. In his own room, he shut the door and groped his way to the bed. There was a stuffy, smothering warmth of closed windows. He didn't light the lamp and didn't lift the window sash. He lay down fully clothed, hands clasped behind his head, his gun on his belt, deep uneasiness in his mind.

After a while he got up and opened his door, then went over and drew a chair close to the window. He wanted a smoke but decided against it. Time passed; tension tightened his nerves.

SMALL sounds became audible in the house, rustlings and creakings, the drawn-out groan of rafters settling into place. A current of air fanned his cheek. He stiffened in the chair. In the darkness he let his hand inch slowly to the handle of his holstered gun.

Moments passed. Now he heard the soft, whispering, brushing noises of moth wings against ceilings and walls, a tiny, sibilant bumping . . . bumping . . . bumping . . .

He stiffened in his chair, palm glued to the wood and steel of the gun on his belt. He heard only the drum-beat of his own heart, the slow bellows-like sound of his own uneven breath.

He felt, rather than saw, the figure

standing suddenly in the open doorway, a dim and muffled shape that had materialized out of the hall's blackness. At the same instant came the shot!

For a moment after the shock of that report, silence and the taint of powder-smoke spread through the room. He sprang up and flattened himself against the wall. His gun slid free of leather and he cocked it and aimed at the doorway.

The weapon's blinding flash came next as he fired into the hall. He waited then, dry-mouthed, holding his breath. There was no sound from the hallway, but suddenly he heard a door creak shut. The blackness of the room and the night outside was like the darkness on earth before the sun was created. It engulfed all things, all movement and normal sound. It spewed out terror, violence and mystery.

Crouching, he slid along the wall, circling the room and coming to the doorway. There he halted, listening, the hair rising at the back of his neck like the hackles on a bristling dog. He drew a breath and stepped into the hall, pulling aside and standing flat against the wall. He saw the crack of light beneath Big Fin's door and the one under Hannah McChristian's.

Then he heard Abby's sobbing cry, "Dal!"

He moved to her door and whispered hoarsely, "All right! Don't open your door!"

He went on and came to his father's room. He opened the door, then froze motionless, staring. Big Fin sat on the edge of his bed. His bare feet rested on the floor; his gaunt shoulders hung forward; and from one of his bony hands hung a blue-steel revolver. On his bearded visage was the staring, empty look of a sleepwalker.

This was shock piled on shock. Dal stood as though rooted in the doorway, sick with the thought that his own father had tried to murder him. But now, strangely, the old man made no attempt to lift the gun he held so slackly. He sat forward, unmoving, like an automaton incapable of any motion without the pulling of certain strings. It seemed almost as though Big Fin was unaware of his surroundings and that his mind was tuned only to sounds and impulses emanating from a dark world beyond the ken of nor-

mal minds. It was awesome, frightening, terrible.

DAL heard a footstep behind him. He twisted around, turning his head, the gun lifting in his hand. Hannah McChristian stood in the open doorway of her room, lamplight reflected from her chamber glowing on her gaunt profile, sharpening in shadow all of its angles and hollows.

Dal read the fury that gleamed in her eyes. She breathed heavily and she gave him a bitter, killing stare—hating him, mocking him with that repelling glance.

He stood motionless, knowing this strange woman's evil ways but shocked speechless at the depth of her rage. Violence had changed her into a thing not human. She said, "I warned you! When you came here lyin' and sneakin' you the same as asked for what you're goin' to get!"

Before Dal could find words to speak, she whipped around and went back in her room. The door slammed and the sound went rocketing through the empty, silent house like a pistol shot.

He swung back into his father's room and advanced on the old man. "Take it easy, old-timer," he said in a voice he tried to make calm and steady. It had a hollow, shaky sound in his own ears. "Nothin' to worry about!"

Big Fin never moved, and he made no sound as Dal took the revolver from his hand. Dal smelled the weapon's barrel. It had no trace of the odor of powder-smoke. He broke the weapon. The chambers of the cylinder held six cartridges, all unfired!

Dal shoved the weapon under his belt. He looked at his father, muttering, "Thank God, it wasn't you!"

Then came the scream through the big dark house. Dal jumped toward the hallway. The scream came again, from Abby's room. Abby's voice was something a man couldn't forget, and he lunged toward her door.

His shoulder hit the panel; the panel cracked. "Abby! Abby!"

He backed away and flung himself at the door. Three times his shoulder struck the wood. The third time the door crashed inward and he staggered headlong into the darkened room beyond. Cold air struck

his face. The window was open. He called again, "Abby!" but there was no answer.

He sprang to the window and peered out, his gun lifted against the darkness in the ranchyard. Nothing was visible, nothing but the black hulk of the barn and the pale outline of the corrals.

He lifted his leg and thrust it over the sill. A second later he was standing in the yard, his gun cocked and ready.

He stared to right and left, hearing no sound and seeing no movement. A new sound jerked him rigid. The heavy, rushing tread of a man came from inside the house, then stopped abruptly. Dal made a run for the rear gallery and flung himself at the door, only to whip around to retrace his steps. He had forgotten the bolt he himself had thrown!

He reached the open window, then stiffened. Someone was slowly lowering the sash. He called harshly, "Who's that?"

The window sash was slammed down from within. Dal fired simultaneously. Glass crashed. Instantly a volley of shots split the night behind him. Bullets raked the adobe wall and dust filled the air. He flattened himself against the house and clubbed the barrel of his gun against the remaining window glass.

He climbed through the jagged opening and was again inside Abby's room. His foot immediately touched the giving bulk of something on the floor and stopped him with a start. He drew away and waited, then circled the room to the hallway door. Whoever lay on the floor was dead; he had listened for breathing but had heard none.

He jumped into the hall, blundering along the passage toward Big Fin's door.

His eyes saw no lights and his hand brushed the wall, feeling for the opening of his father's room. Then his hand touched emptiness and he stopped. The door was wide open. The room beyond was in total darkness now. Someone had extinguished the lamp on the far wall near Big Fin's bed.

THIS was danger piled on danger. He had to walk across the room in darkness, and he didn't dare call out to his father on the bed lest he immediately betray his position when he spoke.

He had a bad moment thinking that Blount had brought his crew back to the ranch and that some of them might be in the house, admitted by Hannah, in fact might be crouching in this room, their guns waiting. Sweat drenched his shirt. His eyeballs ached from the strain of staring at blackness.

He moved into the room on bent legs, his gun tight in his fist. He could hear breathing suddenly, and it came from the bed. Big Fin must still be sitting there staring at nothing.

He bore against the right wall suddenly, sliding along it, then feeling upward for the lamp, his right hand gripping his gun, the finger tense on the trigger.

He bumped the foot of the bed. Guided by this, he felt for a match, found one and raked it down the wall. The spurt of flame he held at arm's length gave him a brief view of the room. The hall door stood open and against the wall, but the room was empty. He put his gun on the bed and lighted the lamp, lowering the smoky glass chimney. Light flared in the room.



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He looked down at his father on the bed. The old man lay on his side, his eyes closed, a strange placidity on his bearded visage.

Then he heard a sound behind him. He moved his head, twisting his body at the hips, his frame off balance. Poised this way and awkwardly turning, he saw the flash of gunflame and heard the report. At the same instant he saw Vic Blount standing in the hall and felt the fiery stab of lead in his upper left arm.

The bullet shook him like the kick of a mule, staggered him. He tried to bring his own gun up as he faded down against the floor. On Blount's thick face was a blankness. Only his eyes held a staring gleam of hate.

In that fraction of time that was too short to be gauged, Dal knew the foreman would fire again and this time kill him. Sprawling on the floor, Dal thrust his gun out and upward. . . .

There was a second flash of flame and a jarring explosion. It was blasting sound that came behind Dal, came from his father's bed, and the echo crashed deafeningly in the confines of the room.

Staring, holding his fire, Dal saw Blount sway back as if clubbed in the chest. A puff of dust fanned out from the burly foreman's vest. Blount seemed to collapse with a spasm of stiffened arms and legs. The gun he held slipped to the floor. Then he dropped, arms and legs thrashing. On the floor, his body strained and went rigid, then did not move again.

Gunsmoke was a stink in the room. Dal looked around at the bed. He saw his father braced on one elbow, his gaunt shoulders hunched forward, both knotted hands locked on the stock and twin barrels of a scatter-gun which he had thrust out of his blankets.

Big Fin's face was as gray as death, but his eyes were alive. Like new nail-heads, they shone out of hollow sockets as he threw the shotgun to the floor, gasping, "Son, for God's sake, watch the door!"

DAL rose to his feet, dazed by what had happened. Yet it had happened. He held his gun ready and walked toward the hall doorway. He didn't look around at his father again because just then firing started in the ranchyard. Guns banged

and the shouts of men and the swift thunder of riders came right after the shots.

He went lurching and stumbling down the hallway and into the kitchen, his left arm helpless and dripping blood. He opened the gallery door, pulling the bolt with the hand that held his gun. On the veranda he saw this scene: horsemen were streaming past the rear of the house, circling; the sullen red flashes of their guns laced the darkness like fireworks.

Yonder, near the corrals, were other men, men who crouched and fired rifles and sixguns recklessly, desperately, hopelessly. This was Vic Blount's cut-throat crew firing and dying in the dust.

Pandemonium reigned. Bullets boiled the dust and whacked the house. Gunsmoke made a drifting fog against the night. The weapons of the circling riders went on roaring for a while, until finally the group huddled near the corrals no longer fired but were stretched out motionless on the ground.

Then the shooting stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Riders were dismounting all over the yard under the oaks and down by the barn. One man came striding toward the gallery where Dal stood, a hand clapped to his wound to stay the blood. This man wore a huge-brimmed sombrero and big-roweled jingling spurs—Sheriff Juan Galindo.

"Señor Goodale?" the sheriff called, swinging up on the gallery. Then he saw Dal and said, "Oh, you, amigo!" He scrutinized the other carefully. "You are the son of the viejo—the old one?"

Dal nodded numbly and turned back into the kitchen. Following, the sheriff said, "You bought three oranges at a store in town. That hombre who sold you the oranges is an amigo of your father and of me. He is the one who told me your name. Tonight I thought it time we pay the ranch another call. *'Sta fortuna-do!'*"

They were moving down the hall. Dal said, "My father's in there. I've got to find Abby—"

"My men have the young lady," said the sheriff. "Those *orejanas* had her in the bunkhouse. Now we will go in together and talk to your father. I think perhaps he is not so crazee after all!"

They reached Big Fin's door. "In

here," Dal said. He made a weary gesture.

The old man lay on his bed, his face gray and drawn under his scrubby beard. But his eyes held something very close to happiness. He looked at the two men who stood above him. "Howdy, Juan," he said to the sheriff. To Dal he sighed, "Son, you came in time. Thank God!"

Dal stood near the bed, with a uselessly dangling arm but a grin suddenly on his mouth, a hard grin. "Dad," he murmured, "you even had me fooled! And when I found you with that gun—"

"Abby brought me that hogleg," said the old man. "The whole thing was an act I had to put on, son. They've starved me down and kept me locked in here for months. Only Abby knew I was fakin' and I made her promise she wouldn't tell anyone—not even you when you showed up today."

THERE was a step in the hallway. A grizzled posseman looked in and drawled, "We found that old witch. Stone dead in the gal's room. Bullet between the eyes!"

"Good riddance!" said the sheriff emphatically.

Dal said, "Dad, why'd you ever let Hannah pull the wool over your eyes?"

Big Fin closed his eyes wearily. He said, "I made a mistake. Figured I'd never see or hear from you or your mother again. Then I was took down sick . . ." He shuddered. "She starved me so I couldn't walk. And that damned booze . . . Let's forget it!"

"Do you remember makin' another will?" Dal asked.

"Yeah. You'll find it in her room, I guess. Now she's dead . . ." He stared up at Dal. "Who killed her?"

Dal started to speak, but the sheriff said quickly, "One of my men must have hit her."

Big Fin was silent and then said, "Hell, I got to learn how to walk again! My laigs feels as useless as winder shutters on a hoss!"

The sheriff laughed. "You'll be riding the range in about two short weeks, amigo!"

Footsteps came running down the hall. They all saw Abby come in, wide-eyed, wondering, still pale, and still a little frightened. She ran to Dal and clung to him, tears in her eyes.

"It's all over," he told her softly. "You see?" He pointed to his father who was smiling weakly.

"Abby kept me alive," the old man said. "She sneaked me grub—and things!" His smiled vanished. "Son, I got regrets. What about your mother? Is her health fair to middlin'?"

"She died," Dal murmured. "That's why I'm here."

Big Fin drew a long breath. Finally he said, "We'll talk later. Now I wanten git some sleep."

They left him then and went back to the kitchen. Sheriff Galindo went out to the yard. Dal saw Abby's face lift toward his. Then she came forward and he put both hands on her shoulders. "Is it the same with you as it is with me?" he asked.

She didn't answer right away. She didn't move away at the pressure of his hands. He pulled her against him, looking down at her face as it lifted to his. He saw her lips move a little and seem to wait, and when he kissed her he said, "This country's my home. I want to stay here. I want to stay where I found my father—and you!"

Her hands came up behind his head. She was smiling now. The pressure of her hands drew his head down lower, and he met her lips again. They were the sweetest things he had ever tasted.

THE END

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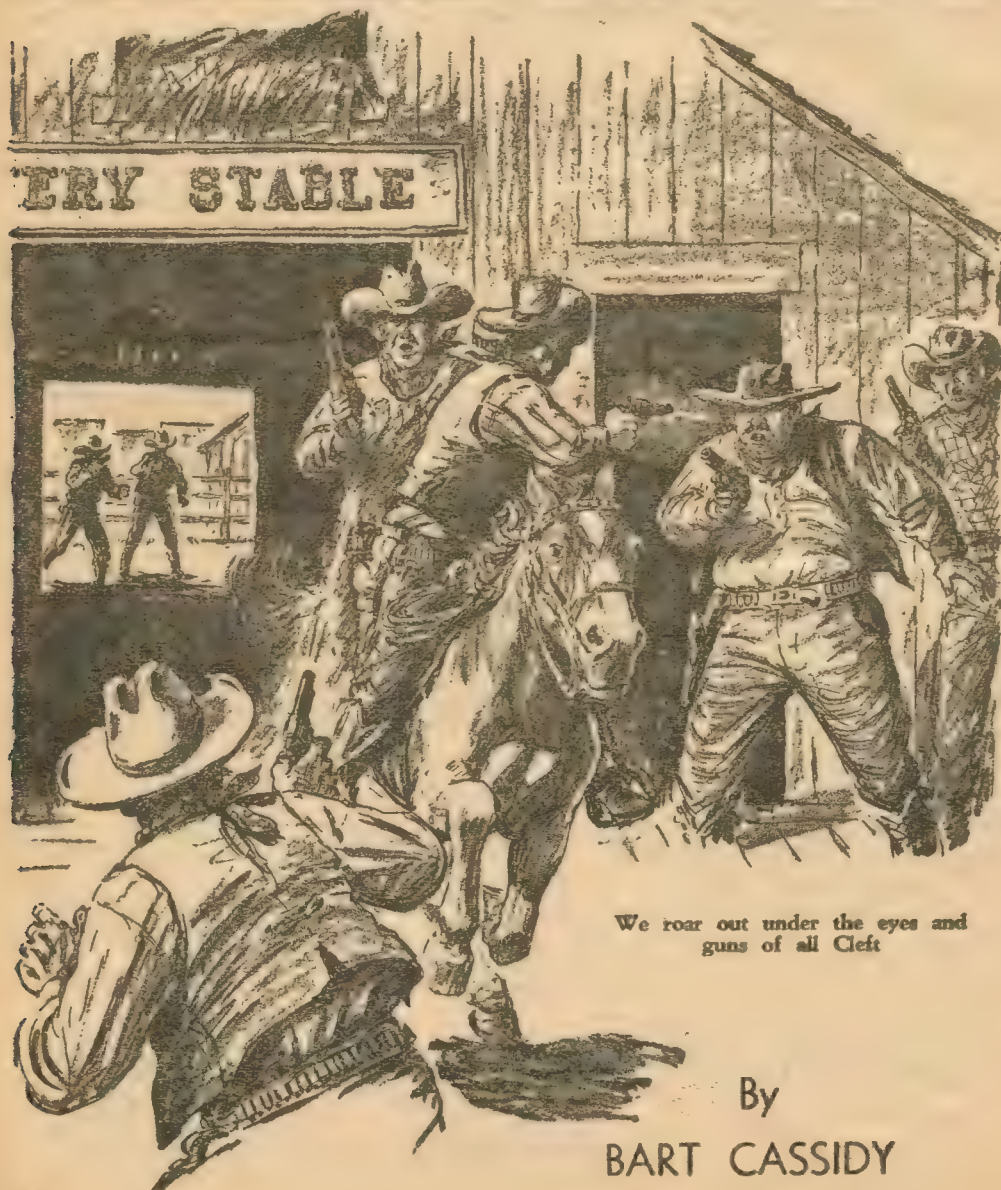
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LAST STAR FOR TENSLEEP

How the red gun-gods of the long trails must have laughed when Split Rock Valley turned that hunted "horse lover," Tensleep Maxon, into a marshal. . . . So that he might dance the hangnoose hoedown — sporting the law's bright-shining star!

A LONG time ago a teacher calls me a "rustic" when I give her a hill-billy answer to a high-falutin' question. Which I plumb live up to the handle when I decide to rusticate—never



We roar out under the eyes and
guns of all Cleft

By
BART CASSIDY

mind why—in the tall timber of Split Rock Valley, at least till certain high excitement dies down an' a certain sheriff an' district attorney ain't under the same hellish pressure to produce a neck for hangin' purposes.

It takes a horse-lover like Missus Maxon's boy Tensleep to notice that said tall timber is well salted with pretty critters that look an' act like broncs without ownin' the same wild-born background, as the feller said. While the world's cryin' for high class saddle stock. The shame of it. . . .

Such business don't pay, if a man figgers his time. But my time's heavy on my hands an' my honest streak's all wool an' a yard wide. So I study the habits of these fuzzies, let 'em see me an' get used to my smell, convince 'em I mean 'em no harm an', when the sign's right, go to work on 'em, ridin' Hassan—one of the fastest quarter horses I ever straddled.

In a week or ten days I've got eight hand-picked critters ketched, combed out an' corralled. I've got a flock uh fresh calouses wore on my saddle seat, a thirst the State of Kentucky couldn't slake, an' a downbearin' yen to mingle again with my feller men. Also I've got a cold pocket yawnin' fer the long foldin' green stuff these ponies should bring in an honest market.

"Come mornin'," I tell them whickerin', friendly critters, "I'll sashay down to Cleft an' hunt you up a new papa." Which promise it ain't necessary for me to keep, after my evenin' visitor's come an' gone. I'm boilin' coffee in a tomato can an' turnin' a juicy little cottontail on the coals when somebody hails my fire.

"Hello the camp!"

"Ride in an' cool off yore saddle, pard," I sing out, genial from loneliness. "If you'll rest your seat, I'll brew up more coffee. . . ."

"Thanks, but don't bother, friend." He rides into the firelight, a tall, bony young sport with a smile like a blessing an' a pale blue eye that gazes straight as a bullet. "I've had my supper, thanks just the same." He lights down, lithe, an' rattles his spurs to the fire where he hunkers to roll a brownie. "Name's Porter Blades." He puffs his cigarette alight an' his eyes are busy inside my makeshift corral. "I

run Lazy B beef in these here Trocadero Hills."

"Glad to meet yuh, Blades." I offer my hand, wincing as he makes his grip. "I'm Wildhorse Jones, horse runner-downer of the Montana Joneses. Hope you ain't gonna tell me these 'stangs are wearin' your secret brand."

He shakes his head, grinning. "I can understand your nervousness, Jones. I've made a pass or two at catching 'em, now an' again. Enough to know it takes special savvy, rare patience an' an iron constitution to succeed. One of my buckaroos reported that you were working this scope. I waited a reasonable time and came over. Nice choice you made. Eight, huh? Been on 'em yet?"

"On 'em, under 'em an' all around 'em. If I do say so, us Joneses sure know how to gentle broncs, Blades. You'll find these all set for trainin' as cowponies. Happen to know anybody needin' ponies . . . cheap?"

"No," he chuckles, "and yes. I've paid boys to hunt this band. I know what's cheap. I need ponies. I'll pay you four hundred for the lot."

"Cripes!" I yelp. "Dollars? Are you joshin', Blades?"

He smiles, pulls out his wallet an' counts it out, yellowback sawbuck bills, nice an' crisp. "Think we can drive 'em tonight, Jones? You can bunk at the ranch, eat breakfast, look us over an' if you liked the looks of Lazy B. . . ."

"With four hundred burnin' my pocket? Don't be silly."

While I polish off the rabbit an' drink the coffee, he goes into the corral an' croons to them fuzzies. They quiet down, even let him paw 'em some. I like him a lot. They drive nice, them 'stangs, an' when they're corralled at Lazy B, he shows me my bunk, makes me acquainted with his ramrod, loses no time diggin' out chips an' cards for nickel-ante poker. We quit at midnight an' I'm losers seventeen dollars. I reach for my purse an' holler: "Holy cow!"

"What the hell?" the ramrod asks.

"My purse," I moan. "Four hundred an' fifty dollars. I had it when I left Trocadero Spring. Sure hope I dropped it there. If not, I can't pay the poker bill, gents. See you later."

I DEPART, cringin' at their hooraw. They don't believe me. Movin' to'rds the corrals, I'm tryin' to figger how I lost that money. The more I think, the more it's a good bet the purse lies at the camp. At the corral, the fuzzies are raisin the devil, kickin', bitin', racin' around. They don't like it so far from the Trocados, thinks I. When I duck under the rail, Hassan comes to me, whickerin', tremblin'. Strange. Nothin' scares him an' he can more'n hold up his end in a fight. As I stroke his neck, soothin' him, I ketch a smell of burnin' hair. Then I know something's wrong.

I lead Hassan through them riotin' 'stangs to where my saddle's on the top rail. Then I ketch the glimmer of fire outside the fence. I poke over. It's only coals, with nobody about an' the reason a mystery. Returnin' to Hassan, I set the kak an' I'm gropin' for the cinch when the cold pistol muzzle jabs my neck. A voice: "Where yo' aimin' to go with Port Blades' pony, cowboy? Reach an' tell it convincin'."

Whee-ew! I rear up, elevatin'. The night's black. All I can see of him is big, blocky, a shiny badge on a broad, beefy chest. Sheriff! Holy cow! "M-me?" I stammer. "This is my pony. I'm goin' after a purse—"

"Whose purse?" he sneers. "Goin' after it with this, eh?" He jerks my gun out. "Your horse, eh? Reckon I should call Blades' buckaroos to verify that—or hang yuh."

"Call Blades," I dare him. "He'll tell you I'm Wildhorse Jones. Been ketchin' an' gentlin' fuzztails in the Trocados. Just sold him eight of 'em."

"You're a liar an' a horse-thief!" he rasps. "I came here, follerin' Early Bryant's tip that Lazy B was rustlin' his ponies. Now you admit it."

"I admit that Bryant never saw these bronses uh mine," I rap, hostile. "Who's he?"

"Bryant? He runs the B Up and Down, beyond the Trocados. His brand's in the off ear of every so-called fuzzy you've sold Blades."

"If that's true," I augur, "you burned them brands. It'll explain the fire, the stink uh burnin' hair an' the ponies raisin' such hell. What kind of a sheriff does

that make you? A pretty lousy one!"

He laughs, tauntin'. "Try to convince Granite County folks. Sheriff Omy Grounds is a horse-thief. What a joke. I should jail you, but if I did they'd lynch you sure. All I could book you on would be stealin' this animal, which after all may be yours. I would have to prove you caught 'em and sold 'em to Blades—the man I'm after. If I let you ride, will you promise to keep goin'?"

"Seems safest, Sheriff. Anyhow, I gotta see a purse about foldin' money."

"Git!" he barks, returnin' my gun an' twistin' his in my belly. "If I get you again, you'll be cottonwood trimmin'. Clear outa here!"

I jerk the cinch, straddle Hassan. Grounds opens the gate an' I spur from there, gooseflesh pimplin' my spine as I brace ag'in a bullet. No bullet comes an' I flash from the Lazy B, Hassan tickled to be gone. I'm sweatin' an' scairt. I've rode two-three miles before I get so mad I forget my lost purse until I reach my corral camp.

I build a fire an' find my purse—lost when I mounted. It don't make me happy 'cause I'm thinkin' of that pot-bellied lawman who's runnin' sandies on Porter Blades. I hone to jab a gun in his guts, an' twist. If he takes them ponies for Early Bryant, I want to ketch Blades eight more. I want to return his four hundred. I'm riled.

I dream up many things to do: nasty things, noble things, impractical things, but mostly I want to depart this range before the spotlight shows me another sheriff—never mind his name. Promisin' to ride out come dawn, I stretch out an' sleep.

Like always, I waken before daybreak, listen to some hooty owl boomin' questions to Hassan's grass-chewin' an' "good mornin'" whicker. Air's crimpy an' I groan with cold as I reach for kindlin'. Then I hear hoofbeats! A pony easin' to'rds me!

When Hassan stops grazin' to listen, I leap down to him, grabbin' his nose so he won't whinny. The pony I hear—he may be a wild one—turns into the brush. Limbs scrapin' against leather tell me it's no 'stang. I hear its rider light down, speaking soft. Rider rattles off some-

wheres. Horse begins to graze, the bit in its mouth. Silence. What the hell? Is somebody stakin' out to pot-shoot me when I show?

Resistin' temptation to fork Hassan an' beat a sneak, I muzzle him with a tail hair an' ooze through brush inch by inch, cougar silent. Gun palmed. Eyes strainin' the pale dawn. If this feller's Omy Grounds, I promise I'll tickle his guts with my gun sight till he yells for mercy. With a heap of pleasure in every damn' old tickle.

A man's cough leads me to'rds a brushy rim. Seein' nothin' of him in the growin' light, I Injun ahead. I hear him grunt, see his hat poke up. Glint of a risin' Winchester! Wow!

I'm more puzzled than scairt. That gun's pointin' wrong. Testin' the light, think I. Lookin' over his sights. Aimin' at him, I open my mouth for the "Lift!" order. The rifle blazes. Cripes! What's the fool shootin' at?

I MUST have spoke aloud. His black eyes suddenly find me, glittery eyes mirroring surprise, desperation. The Winchester swings, gushin' lead. He misses, steps off the bluff an' plummets from sight. Echoes roll. I dart to the rim. Dust hangs over the trail an' I glimpse him as he spurs his pony away. I speed him with a wasted shot, my memory recordin' a weasel face, buck teeth, bugged eyes an' ragged red stubble. His face, turned to the dawn, I'll surely know if I see it again. Just as surely, with my hat pulled low an' back to the light, he'll never recognize me.

Curiosity rowels me. What did the gunman shoot at, an' why? Skeptically, I drop to the trail, pressin' back into the brush as hoofbeats roar to'rds me. A riderless pony stampedes past, stirrups poppin'. Then I know. The weasel-faced gunman wasn't layin' for me. I break into a run, findin' the body huddled in the trail, arms flung wide, sightless eyes on the sky.

About my size, age an' weight, he's dressed expensive an' practical. Whipcord suit. Chinook Stetson. Fancy-stitched Hyers. Silver-chased McChesney girl-leg spurs. I rummage his pockets, turnin' up a letter that reads:

*U. S. Marshal's Office,
Denver, Colorado.*

*Attention Mr. Eddie Osdell.
Gentlemen: Men in and around Cleft make a mockery of law. They have stopped mail coaches, robbed our bank, abused decent citizens like Porter Blades of the Lazy B. Sheriff Omy Grounds is one of them! Contact me quickly before they do away with me.*

Albie Grounds.

The information don't surprise me but the name does. Albie Grounds ain't a common handle. Might be two families in Cleft, but not likely. Might be Omy's son. Cripes! A son aimin' to get his dad hung! Nothin' so deadly as family feudin'.

Omy Grounds controls the postoffice, that's sure. He's read Albie's letter, let it go to Denver an' sent a killer to gulch the approaching marshal. An' now they will beef Albie and Porter Blades too. The Lazy B frame-up ain't puzzlin' no longer. Jail for Porter Blades, free liker, loose talk an' a five-minute jury!

Thoughts torment my mind as I strip Marshal Eddie Osdell—something unthinkable unless I'd half way sold myself on playin' his dropped cards. The bullet split his heart, glanced off his spine an' tore him up inside without spillin' blood. I drag him under a cutbank, cave off dirt, mumble a promise to pay off for him. Later, in my camp, I'm stripped an' about to get into Osdell's duds when hoofbeats drive me to cover again.

Cripes! The rider don't gallop past but turns in at my camp. An' me, I really flatten, naked as beefsteak. A kid voice: "Wildhorse Jones! Hello, Wildhorse!"

That kid rider is good lookin', an' pooched out wrong to be a boy. Gosh! I screech, "Don't poke around here, ma'am. I'm plumb indecent. What you want?"

"Thank God," she breathes. "Wildhorse, the ponies you sold Porter Blades wear Early Bryant's ear brand. Did Bryant pay you to help frame Port into jail?"

"Me?" I yelp, oozin' into tight foxed pants. "I take that unkindly, ma'am. You Albie Grounds?"

"Dear me," she gasps. "However could you know that?"

"Second sight, ma'am. Same way I know who burned them phony brands. Same way I knew your dad hand-nursed the brandin' fire at the Lazy B. last night."

"For your information," she says, crisp, "Omy Grounds isn't my father. He married mother, killed her with cruelty and will kill Porter Blades and me if he has to, to prevent our marriage." She bites her lip, hidin' tears.

"So that's why?" I murmur, findin' Osdell's boots a good fit. "Sorta thin, lady."

"IS IT thin," she cries, "that somebody shot at me this side of town? My pony stumbled, saving me. Is it thin that Omy Grounds intends to have the fifty thousand dollars willed to me by my grandmother that comes to me when I'm twenty-one? Why did mother have that terrible man made my guardian by adoption? Listen—" She's sniffin'. "You must see my lawyer, Ray Batters. He'll take you to Judge Rainbolt. Swear those ponies were not stolen, that Porter's innocent of wrong doing. . . ."

"What'll that solve?" I holler, pullin' on the shirt with the pearl buttons and heart-shaped pockets. "They'll find ways of gettin' rid of him, in or out."

"Oh-h-h, I know it, Wildhorse. Why don't that marshal come?"

"Marshal?"

"I sent for a U. S. Marshal. If he comes now, it'll probably be too late."

"You're too trustin', lady," I scold.

"Blades, too. He trusted me with them ponies an' I played square, but Grounds fixed that. You trusted the postoffice, but crooked spies in there read your letter an' taken deadly measures." I wiggle into Osdell's coat an' slant on his beaver hat. I belt on my cutter an' step out proud as a peacock. She looks an' near falls outa her saddle. I hand her a card. "Marshal Eddie Osdell, ma'am. At your service."

"Osdell? But, Wildhorse, how—when—" She cries, carryin' on like a woman will. My answers calm her an' we talk plans. She's pleased an' cheered when I leave her there to wait for Porter Blades. Now it's between me an' them dug-in crooks. Wheeew! A fool an' his life are soon parted, accordin' to some smart jigger.

"Obeyin' experience an' skepticism, I tie Hassan in bottomland timber an' walk into Cleft. It's hot, quiet, drowsy as a Mex town at siesta. I step into the cool Fashion Saloon, wake a dozing bartender an' buy a drink. Then I try a lunch counter down street, eat a fair meal. The grouchy proprietor riles when I ask if Cleft has its reg'lar "man for breakfast."

"Biscuits kills more men here than bullets, stranger," he sneers. "Remember it when tempted to try my competitors. If my biscuits distress you, cough 'em up an' get double your money back." He turns away, never speakin' another word.

Outside, I locate the office of the J. R. an' poke over. Hizzoner is shoe-horned into a dusty cubby stuffed with papers, books, trash. He's fat, naked to the waist, shiny with sweat. Though half asleep, he wiggle-waggles a palm fan, stirrin' breeze around his three double chins, keeping off swarming flies. "Hello," I greet him, genial.

This cow-country Buddha starts. "Greetings, citizen. What . . . ?" He eyes Osdell's card, beams, offers a moist palm. "Pleased, Marshal. Command me!"

"I'd like Porter Blades released, Judge. I'll guarantee he'll appear at court."

Astonished, he shakes his head. "Sorry, Marshal. Too many thieves, rustlers, highwaymen around here. Gotta make an example of 'em when we catch 'em."

"I'll produce him for the trial, Judge," I promise. "If you won't, I'll consider you stink a mite of skunk, rubbed off Omy Grounds who ear-branded B Up an' Down on eight Lazy B ponies. How about that?"

His belly shakes. "My dear marshal, whoever sold you that bill of goods?"

"My idea, Judge. You see, my alias is Wildhorse Jones!"

"Wildhorse?" His grin fades. "You . . . you caught those eight ponies? You . . ."

"Caught Grounds too, Judge. Runnin' ear brands. Now suppose you issue that—"

"Sure, Osdell . . . sure. No taint of injustice here. But how can you be Osdell when as Wildhorse Jones you hunt ten days in the Trocados? They sent for you only two days—" He pauses, eyes rolling. His talk has revealed him as Omy

Grounds' man. He's in it to his neck. "Know about that, eh, Judge?" I scowl. "Being a lawyer, you know Uncle Sam's finicky about his mail. Write that order. Then take my advice an' light a far shuck."

Sweat streams off him as he pens the order. As I head out with it, a rush of brave hits him. "Young man," he calls, "your unreasonable attitude may earn you an eternity in this town."

"Yeah?" I grin back. "Don't hold your breath, Judge, till your desperator pards make a prophet of you. The wait might be fatal."

On the way down the street, I have to grin as hizzoner busts from his office an' hightails it into the Shorthorn Saloon. Me, I take a chance an' enter the jail-house. Omy Grounds is asleep in his chair, snorin'. Across the office a slim gent tilted back-against the wall wakes up, his Adam's apple bobbin'. "Who are you?" he squeaks.

He looks funny an' I laugh at him. There's fright an' desperation on his weasel face, like at daybreak when he tried to Winchester me. "U.S. Marshal Osdell," I drawl. "Lost my pony this mornin' an' walked in to report a try to murder me. Bushwhacker, near Trocadero Spring. Except for poor shootin' light, I'd be—"

"Wh... whut's that?" Grounds comes alive, glarin', groggy. I tell it again an' he shakes off sleep, swappin' puzzled glances with Red Caskey, his deputy. They ask a lot of questions, funny questions, to me, who knows exactly what they're thinkin'. I answer vague, intendin' to puzzle, confuse an' scare 'em. All I'm

scairt of is that somebody in Cleft who knows Eddie Osdell will betray me before I'm ready.

WHEN they've run out of questions an' out of answers; when they've promised to ride, read sign an' run down the bushwhacker, then I play my ace—Judge Rainbolt's order. Grounds reads it, turns white, then red. He cusses, rumplin' his hair. He paces, the floor, threatenin' the judge, denyin' his right to free Blades.

"Don't be upset, Sheriff," I soothe. "He's remanded to me. I'll produce him."

"What's wrong with jail?" he wails. "Leave him here until the trial."

"I would," I smirk, "if I thought he wouldn't be cottonwood fruit before then."

"Couldn't I defend my own jail?"

"Not if you didn't want Blades brought to trial, Sheriff. Me, I want him out so I can stand up with him while he marries his fifty-thousand-dollar-sweetheart. Then him an' me, we're gonna decipher why you were in the Lazy B corral with a fire an' Early Bryant's B Up an' Down ear iron."

Omy Grounds' eyes hood with fear an' he seems to shrink. His breath speeds, hard an' raspy. Red Caskey, surer of his ground, glares murder at me. "Sa-a-ay," he rages, "you want trouble?"

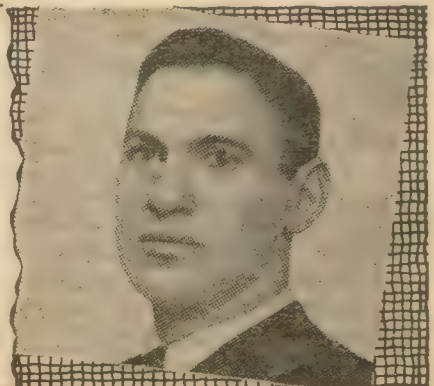
"Root out trouble, redhead," I correct. "I need a few facts, damn few, to peg certain public officials as highwaymen an' desperators. One, a lousy bushwhackin' killer, is fiery-haired, with bug eyes an' buck teeth. Cripes, Red, that fits you, eh?"

"Windbag," brays Caskey. "You ain't got nothin' ag'in me an' Omy."

REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.



"Mention no names, Red. Not for two-three days, mebbe. Now, Grounds, if you will free Blades—"

"Suppose I don't?" the sheriff's sulky, badly shocked.

"Then," I snarl, "I'll use force." I drop my hand to my gun an' they cringe. "Furthermore, Grounds, I'll ask the governor to vacate your office for failin' to cooperate with a federal officer."

I can be hung for illegal impersonation, but I'm tellin' it scary an' likin' it. Without further words, Grounds goes into the cell block an' returns with Blades. Port looks sorta used up, but he's smilin' until he looks at me. His smile fades. He opens his mouth to spill the beans, catches the warning in my eyes an' mumbles, "Thanks, Marshal. I'm sure glad to see you."

"Not at all, Blades. Glad to favor an innocent man jailed by skulduggery. Now, Sheriff Grounds, give him his gun an' I'll take him somewhere for a long talk."

Grounds, his courage fully stampeded, opens a drawer an' hands Blades the rolled gun belt. He's verifysin' the loads when the door smashes open. Something cyclones in, lookin' like a man but big as a horse. Bulgy, dissipated, oozin' rage. "What's this Rainbolt tells me about turnin' Blades loose?"

"Ah, Early." Sheriff Grounds sighs. "Just in time. This gent claims he's Marshal Osdell. He's got Rainbolt's order. Me, I'm between the devil an' the—"

Bryant, plainly outrankin' Grounds with these crooks, leers at me. "Osdell, my eye! This is Tensleep Maxon, a horse-thief worth a thousand, dead or alive. Now, my marshal-impersonatin' ridge runner—" He stabs for his gun but I'm ahead of him, Red Caskey an' Grounds, but not much ahead of Porter Blades.

"Up, buzzard-bait!" I clip, retreatin' so as to cover all three. "Take their guns, Port. I'd hate to cheat the hangman. Good. Now, you dehorned desperators, move into a nice filthy cell—fast!"

"You'll die for this, horse-thief," snarls Bryant. "My punchers are in town an' when they bust me outa this, I'll show you some fancy manhuntin'."

I laugh hard, an' lock 'em in the

cell. Port Blades clicks handcuffs across the entrance an' we depart, blushin' at some artistic profanity. I lock the cell block an' the jailhouse, tossin' the keys into a weedy lot as we pass. Me, I ain't as chipper as I act. An' Port's positively doleful.

"Now what?" he moans. "What'll we do now, Wildhorse?"

HAVING played the wise gazabo, I'm wishin' for second sight. I've sowed the wind. But now is no time to lay back an' let the enemy gather. "Albie's at Trocadero Spring," I tell Port, "waitin' for you to come marry her. Take her on a long honyemmoon to Cheyenne, Denver or Santa Fe till things simmer down, then—"

"Beautiful," he says, scornful. "An' you?"

"Oh, I'll send a wire to the marshal's office, holdin' desperators away from the jail till reinforcements arrive. Don't worry about the law, Blades."

"I admire you," he says, fervent, "more'n if you were what you claim. You see, when I had Albie write the marshal, I asked for my friend Eddie Osdell. Where is Eddie, Wildhorse?"

"Under a cutbank, a hundred feet east of Trocadero Spring. Red Caskey Winchestered him. When you get back, take a marshal there an' have him buried decent."

Port shudders. "Too bad. His poor wife and two boys. I feel guilty, having asked for him. You saw it, eh? Sa-a-ay, are you Tensleep, like Bryant claims?"

"Tensleep Maxon, yes. Mostly though I'm partial to Wildhorse Jones."

"Uh-huh. I'm afraid we're boxed, Tensleep. You can't wire for a marshal; the sheriff controls the telegraph office. Even if they let me leave town, they'll kill me before I reach Albie. Bryant's renegade punchers are in the Shorthorn, watching us. They'll soon learn Bryant's locked up and then our minutes are numbered. Listen to them roar in that cell."

Them three are wakin' the dead in Cleft's Boothill, the sounds filterin' into the Shorthorn. A man comes out, listens an' ducks in again. "Won't be long now," I mutter. "Port, let's try sendin' that wire, even if we use pistol persuasion an' bluff

the operator that we savvy Morse."

"I know Morse, Tensleep," he grins. "Came west as a telegrapher for the N. P. to Billings. Sure, we'll send that wire. Come along." He leads out.

A pinch-faced telegrapher turns pale as we enter, revealin' in his fear that he has been wised to this possibility. "N-no messages, boys," he quavers. "L-line's down somewhere and—" He falls silent as the key rattles some incoming message. I waggle my pistol, scarin' him green.

"Come outa that chair, son," I order. "Port, set down an' do your do."

It takes less than ten minutes but in that time the town's roused an' streamin' to the jailhouse. An' for the dozenth time, the weak-kneed telegrapher moans. "They'll kill me for this. They'll fill my guts with lead."

Port gets up, grim as hell but satisfied. "That'll get 'em here on the double, Tensleep. But it can't be sooner than tomorrow morning sometime. Better bounce this boy so he can't countermand the message." He jerks his head an' the telegrapher ducks outside, huntin' some deep hole to pull in after him.

Down at the jail, they're doin' some gun blastin', peelin' the jail offa Bryant, Grounds an' Caskey. Mebby, now that we've sent the message, there'd be time for us to slip out an' save our skins. We could fight, barricaded in the telegraph office, but they'd surely bust in an' wipe us out. I'd rather roll spurs than pick a harp.

"Look, Port! They're busy pryin' that jailhouse an' listenin' to that telegrapher. Suppose you an' me hunt safer places." I rip out the telegraph key.

"But I don't know where my horse is,"

he complains. "And without a horse. . ."

"To hell with him. Come on."

The back door gives to a deserted alley an' we take it, runnin'. It's a hundred yards to the feed barn, an' a horse for Port. We cover it without any alarm bein' raised, find the barn untended an' all ponies in the corral behind. Leavin' Port to rope one, I ease through the barn an' peer out. High excitement around the jail, Bryant an' his pards come bustin to the street, the bull voice of the B Up an' Down boss reachin' all over town.

"Ki-swat, you whiskey-guzzlin' gunnies! Ring that telegraph office! Thousand each for them two, dead on the boardwalk!"

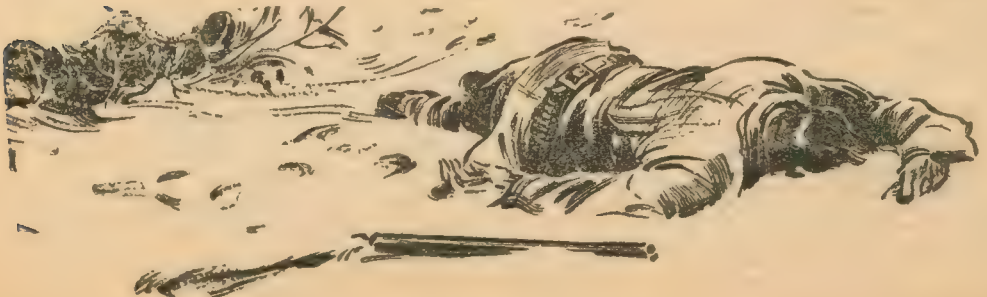
THEY answer yellin', swarmin' to the hunt. Holy cow! I spring through the barn knowin' in minutes they'll discover we're gone. Port's dabbed a twine on a hammerhead an' he's in trouble. I try to help, but it's like saddlin' a sore-backed outlaw at a buckin' convention. He rears, snorts, kicks an' cavorts, just like Bryant's payin' him. Yellin' an' the tramp of boots gets nearer. Wow!

"Into that kak!" I blat, 'earin' that bronc.

"But—"

"No buts—get up! I'll jump on behind. Out the front an' across the street, and to hell with bullets. Straight to the crick where my Hassan pony waits. Roll 'em!"

He mounts. The bronc leaps. I spring. Momentum whirls me up an' I grab Port. To'rds the front we roar, pony runnin', not buckin'. From behind comes Bryant's beller. "Here they are! Spurrin' out!" A gun blast. A bullet whistlin'.



"Nail 'em, Omy! Cut them down, boy!"

An' there, right before us, stands Omy Grounds, gun linin'. Port's gun lifts. I yell, "Not him, boy. Take Bryant, behind!"

Mebbe I'm sentimental, but Grounds is a shirrtail parent to Port's gal. Port must be thinkin' along them lines for he twists an' let go. I fire past him, an' Omy Grounds wilts shapeless, right before us. The pony swerves, almost dumpin' me. Port looses a victory shout. "Got him! Killed the dirty dog, Tensleep! Hang on; out we go!"

We roar out, under the eyes an' guns of all Cleft. We're half way across the street before the ball opens. Cripes! Sounds like the Yanks chargin' up San Juan Hill. Me an' Port duck, prayin', an' we're lucky. Before a building shields us, I'm hit three times, Port five an' the horse seven. None are serious. At the crick, I light off, fork Hassan an', stirrup to stirrup, we scud before a spirited but disorganized chase.

Come sundown, the leaderless posse quits. Port, tired as he is, slaps me on the back an' lights out of Trocadero Spring. Me, I hit for the mesa overlookin' Cleft, pleased if not amused to see the B Up an' Down punchers gathered dejected before the undertaker's.

Night falls. Sometime around midnight, when I'm gettin' terrible sleepy, a lantern flashes at the feed barn an' there's business in the corral. Soon a a buckboard drawn by matched ponies flashes from the barn an' out of town. I pull Hassan's cinch, straddle him an' tip off the mesa, waitin' at the road for the buckboard. When it comes wheelin' around the bend an' I stop it, the driver acts some like he's gonna fight, but he decides against it.

"See you're takin' my advice, Judge," I taunt him. "Where you headed?"

"None of your business," he rasps, blustery.

"Mebbe not," I grin. "What you carryin' with you?"

"More of my business," he sneers.

I rap him across his hard skull, playful. "You're in contempt, Your Honor," I chuckle. "Personal, I don't care where you go, just so's it's far enough. But what

you take along is more'n my business. It's the business of the pretty wife of a dead marshal an' her two children. Let's see." I lift a telescope grip that hefts like clothes. There's a couple of boxes of books. There's a small alligator satchel so heavy I can just lift it out an' that's all. It clinks musical when I drop it. "G'bye, Judge," I sing out. "Hope you have a nice trip. If you ever need a character reference. . . ."

He curses me, lays his whip on the ponies an' goes from there. Dust swirls about me as I ponder what to do with that satchel. No doubt that Judge Rainbolt was getting away with his share of the loot an' Bryant an' Grounds' too. It's a rich stake—a hundred or more pounds of gold coins. Not carin' to burden Hassan with it, I cache it an' return to the mesa.

Come dawn, I'm hungry, cold, a prisoner of cheerlessness. The town's quiet an' if Bryant's renegade cowboys are in town, they're lyin' low. My bet is that they're long gone, knowin' that wire will fetch the law. An' fetch the law it does. Along about ten o'clock, a cavalcade of deputy marshals ride into Cleft. An' with 'em are Port Blades an' the beautiful gal who will soon be his bride. There's no resistance, nothin' but the welcome of Cleft's decent people. One of the first things the marshals do is to send out the undertaker for the body of poor Eddie Osdell.

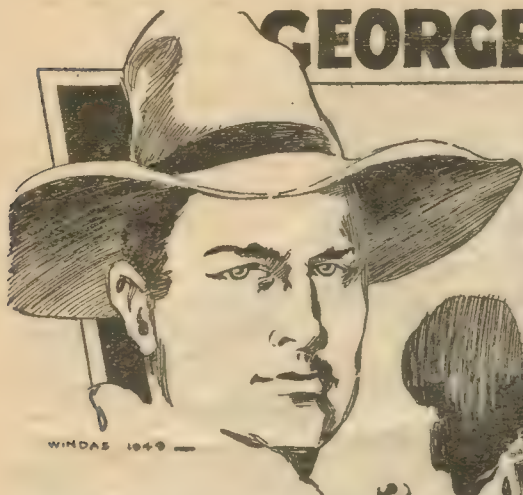
Presently I ride down, eat a hearty meal an' hunt Blades. He's in the sheriff's office an' he's glad to see me, to judge by his handshake. "Everything's perfect, Tensleep," he beams. "They've appointed me temporary sheriff, pending the governor's appointment, which I'll get. Marshal Strong's at the hotel, resting up, but after while I'd like you to meet him. He thinks there'll be reward money due you."

"You take it, Port," I grin. "An while you're talkin' money, pick up some I've cached for Eddie Osdell's widow." I tell him how to find the cache. "Kiss the bride for me, son, an' fer gosh sake don't name the first one Tensleep. Adios."

He shakes my hand, too moved to speak. I leave him, fork Hassan an' ride from Cleft. An' the thing I remember best, I think, is the townfolks liftin' their hands to me as I pass.



GEORGE GIBBONS



Born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1833, George Gibbons left his home in the spring of 1851 to seek his fortune via the covered wagon route to California. In Sacramento he met the famous James E. Birch (future transportation tycoon) and their friendship proved mutually valuable.

Birch gave Gibbons a job driving the first regular stage line between Sacramento and Hangtown. Times were lawless, desperadoes many. Gibbons was the hero of the district when, though badly wounded, he outfought and killed the notorious Steve Webber and two accomplices as they attempted to rob the stage.



In Sacramento, bandits planned to loot the stage company's safe. They trussed Birch and a clerk, seized \$9,000 in gold. But before they could make their getaway, Gibbons led townsmen to the rescue. He shot one outlaw. The other was captured. Birch and his clerk were freed, and the gold was returned to the safe.



During the Civil War, Gibbons actually drove a gold shipment consigned to the Federal Government, from Sacramento to St. Louis, Missouri. He and his escort twice fought off Confederate raiders, and delivered the bullion safely. Gibbons was rewarded for this service; and returned West. He died shortly afterwards in Sacramento in 1867.

ON THE DODGE!

He saw Duffy's cheek against
the carbine's stock



Gripping Novelette of Pardners
on the Grim Boothill Trail.

By FRANK BONHAM

Some men, like Tom Cardiff, rustler, try to make their peace with society and start again with clean hands. Others, like his saddlemate Duffy Gaines, try all their lives to lick the law. And still others, like Sheriff Mulcare, watch and wait eternally—for the one chance to braid a slip-knot around a reckless, luckless, courageous neck. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Lure of the Owlhoot

THEY had taken to the creek at the first suspicion they were being trailed. The steers lunged along through the shallow, stony stream ahead of them, the riders swinging ropes briskly

to keep them stepping. Pine Creek tumbled out of the timbered mountains standing between the John Day country and the desert. In that thirty-mile wilderness cattle could be hidden for weeks, until the sign was right to shove them along.

Tom Cardiff smacked a lazy steer on the rump and sent it piling into the



Duffy was drawing a slow bead on the posse

animals ahead. He said to Duffy Gaines, "Keep them moving. I'll take a line from the ridge."

Duffy, a solid, thickly-made man with a fringe of short black beard following the line of his jaws and upper lip, waved a gloved hand and crowded his pony into another steerer's rump. His carbine rested on the swell of his saddle, the barrel rubbing at an old groove worn through to the tree.

Cardiff loped off through the trees. He came to an eminence of rocks and trees from which he could see the green hour-glass valley below. Faintly he caught the sound of horses and now he saw them moving in a file along Pine Creek, no more than a half mile below. He recognized Coke Shepley, whose cattle he and Duffy were hustling south, and he picked out Shepley's ramrod, Sam Derrick, and three other men.

One was Sheriff Mulcare, and the sight of him caused Cardiff's belly muscles to bunch. Mulcare was as native to these Oregon mountains as Cardiff himself. Beyond that it was the first time in his weeks of raiding Snaketrack herds that Cardiff had come face to face with the proposition that they had laws about rustling, and men to enforce them.

He swung the horse back. Coming down through the orange and red bushes of serviceberry hiding the stream, he found the small bunch of cattle with the single rider pushing them, and he said tersely, "All right, son! We hit for Uncle Red Brander's. They're closer than a half-mile."

Duffy Gaines' broad, dark face came alive. "Hate to give up these cows," he grinned. "Why not hole up here and knock a couple of hosses out from under those hell-fired cowmen? They'll shake loose."

Cardiff looked at him and thought, He's having more fun than he ever had when we pulled one slick. He said, "You know the answer to that. The first time a cap is cracked on one of these jobs, the corporation's dissolved."

Gaines said, "Okay, kid. But one of these days you'll learn something about sheriffs and cowmen."

He slung after Cardiff as he headed up through the brush onto a steep hillside.

A dark, aggressive big man with blunt good-nature, his brow was wide and his deep-brown eyes friendly. He liked to pin his hatbrim up in front like a cavalryman. It gave him a reckless look which was honestly come by.

But when it came to the Blues, Tom Cardiff could out-track him or any other man in the John Day country. Duffy was just an amateur, a skilled amateur who had drifted along about the time Cardiff was starting in on Shepley's Snaketrack herd.

Shepley called it his herd, at any rate. The cows had been grabbed on foreclosures and the land was a great patchwork quilt of small irons—like Tom Cardiff's—which had fallen to him when he acquired the defunct Oregon & Nevada Railroad. The road was two streaks of rust and some rotting ties. But it comprised also some railroad lands of cloudy title, and when Shepley's platoon of lawyers quit firing, Shepley was next door to being the only cowman in that corner of John Day Valley.

Cardiff was a patient man. Dollar by dollar, he was getting back what he had been robbed of. When he was through, Shepley would have a few thousand fewer cows, but Cardiff would have the money to start over.

THE trail worked over rough ground toward a gap. They were halfway to the gap, thrusting through ironwood thickets when the scrape of hoofs came from below. Tom looked down to discover, through green steeples of spruce and pine, a gang of horesmen spurring along a cow-trail. He heard Duffy swear.

He stopped an instant to figure, to sort the trails and ghosts of trails he knew that would take them out of this . . . Something caused him to glance back. He saw Duffy's cheek against the carbine stock. He was drawing a slow bead on the posse.

Tom shouted, "No!"

But the shot roared away. He saw bark fly from a tree just ahead of Shepley, a hundred yards below. The men scattered like quail. A moment later, as Duffy spurred his pony along, the leaves of a low-growing oak stirred and a shot thudded into a tree near them. Tom walloped his

horse along, furious with Duffy for violating the agreement they had had from the start: No gun play.

Tom had never deceived himself about what waited at the end of the trail he'd embarked on. But there was a choice of gray walls and black gallows, and he had rather favored the walls.

They hesitated an instant in the gap, a good reach ahead of the possemen. Cardiff's eyes sought through the crumpled blue hills toward Uncle Red Brander's. In the instant of spurring the horse along, he said angrily, "How long's your word good? Five minutes?"

Duffy's eyes showed a glint of anger. "You can thank me they didn't take us back there. That's a shootin' posse, mister, not an arrestin' posse."

Tom shook his head and said, "Not while Mulcare's leading it. He's one of the old crowd himself. If we give him a break, he'll give us one."

He put the spurs to his pony and lunged along a faint trail.

* * *

This time of evening Uncle Red Brander liked to loaf through the small chores about the ranchyard. The ranch lay pleasantly in a yellow-green meadow where Pine Creek canyon opened out. The pastures ran up into hillsides black with timber. The air was pungent and the silence utter, except for the small sounds of cattle and the contented feeding-noises of the henflock his daughter, Rae, kept.

Distantly a screech-owl cried. It was nearing dark but not dark enough for screech owls, and Uncle Red stepped to the forge and began to grub in a box of old horseshoes. . . .

The two horsemen who raked in shortly were on blown ponies caked with mud. He knew by the way they sprang down in the yard that they were in a hurry. Uncle Red called his daughter.

She came quickly from the ranchhouse, a slender red-headed girl of eighteen with a provocative figure. "Help Duff wash off his hoss," he told her.

Tom Cardiff built himself a smoke while Uncle Red went to work, gripping the foreleg of Cardiff's pony between his knees and beginning to pull shoe nails.

He said, "Uncle Red, you can change horseshoes faster than a lot of men can change their socks."

"Or a sheriff can tie a hangrope." Massive and shaggy as a cinnamon bear, the rancher wore a full beard streaked with gray. His hands were large and meaty. He pulled a shoe, threw it under the raised forge box, slapped a new one with worn calks into place.

While Brander finished, Cardiff washed the mud from his horse, except for a small amount on cannon and fetlock. "Heard a shot," Brander said.

"The damn dogs had their teeth in our hip-pockets," said Duffy Gaines. "Had to shake 'em."

He and Rae were drying his grulla with an old blanket. Uncle Red said tersely, "I thought you said no shooting?"

"You think we want to get hung?" Duffy asked. "Shepley ain't looking for somebody to stick in jail."

Cardiff didn't answer, but he thought a little deeper into the subject of Duffy Gaines than he had before.

They had teamed up last winter, almost by accident. Cardiff had come across a man with a running iron in his campfire one evening while scouting Coke Shepley's range for strays. The fact that a running iron was thrust into his own boot served as an introduction.

They never talked of themselves much. What Tom Cardiff knew about Duffy was that he was not new to cattle-stealing, that he had an arrangement with a man who called himself Owl Rawson for the disposition of whatever beef he could deliver in that lost country beyond the ridge. What Gaines knew about Tom was that he had a grudge of some sort against Coke Shepley. That was all they needed to know to form a partnership.

BRANDER finished the second horse and they had turned both into the corral by the time hoofbeats sounded on the trail. Cardiff looked at Rae. He had the feeling she was on the verge of tears. She had looked this way the day he rode up to say their plans would have to wait a while, because Shepley's lawyer had made Tom's look like a hayseed at the trial.

She bit her lip and said, "Some men just have to have it proved to them that a boomerang comes back, don't they?"

Cardiff shook his head in slow dissatisfaction with everything.

Brander brought a dozen cured fox pelts, still on frames, from a shed. When the men rode into the yard, he was examining a pelt as he sat on the stoop of the ranchhouse. He looked up. "Well, howdy, boys!" and Cardiff took off his hat and scratched his head. Duffy Gaines had his saddle gun on his lap, slowly rubbing the steel.

Sheriff Mulcare was the first man to dismount. A big two-fisted Irishman, he ran a wide-open town but tolerated no horseplay. He stared at the group on the steps for a moment and then marched over to inspect the ponies in the corral. He ducked under the bars and checked them closely. Then he came back. By this time Coke Shepley and his ramrod, Sam Derrick, were approaching.

Mulcare asked, "Where are the horses?"

"Whatta you think them are in the corral? Antelope?" Uncle Red said. He held the pelt high, saying, "How you like that for a red fox, boys? These gents are going to get rich off of me."

Uncle Red Brander, one of the few cattlemen who hadn't been ousted from John Day Valley by the big-shouldered Shepley methods, trapped, bought and sold a few peltries. Shepley claimed he made his money hiding stolen cattle.

"Look here!" Shepley snapped. He was a large man, too stout for easy riding. His face was choked by an excess of blood after the hard trek up from the valley. He had a jaw like a trap and cold, gray-green eyes. "We been tracking two men and six cows for the last three hours. I say these are the men right here! And don't give me any pious howdedo about trapping!"

"Some fellers," said Tom Cardiff. "just can't be satisfied. Here me and Duff stay back in the peaks trapping and living on cold hardtack, and you jump us for rustling! Sheriff, what do they want us to do?"

"Maybe," Sam Derrick said, "we want you to be back there trapping when the rustling's going on." Derrick was a lean

man of wolfish build, his skin loose and red. He wore a frayed brown mustache and his teeth were stained by the tobacco he chewed.

Duffy stood the carbine against the log wall and stood up. "This is getting downright insulting," he said. He was sober, but his mouth held a particular kind of taunt, a wicked, amused contempt.

Derrick's homely face warred with itself, wanting to throw the taunt back at him, but he turned away in a moment and said, "I'd like to see those hosses for myself."

He went into the corral, and Shepley stood breathing deeply in his fury. He said, "I just came mighty close to dropping those cow-thieves that run me ragged for the last year. So close that my belly's shakin' like a coyote straddlin' a spring lamb. I'm going to be damned sure I get them next time. I'm raising pay and handing out shells, and I'm going to tell every man who works for me to drop anybody he sees on the Snaketrack that don't give the high-sign.

Sheriff Mulcare said a little impatiently, "Drop some hard luck drifter, Shepley, and I'll hang his hard luck around your neck."

"Drifters," said Shepley, "don't ride behind southgoing cows." He picked up the fox pelt and thumped the hide. "This thing's six months old."

Uncle Red took the peltry out of Shepley's thick hands. "I take it that means me, too?"

"That means you, too," said Shepley.

"I just wanted to be sure," Brander said. "You see, I'll pass the word along to my boys, too, along with a handful of shells."

Shepley looked as though he had stepped into a hole in the dark. Then he said quickly, hotly, "Look here! This back-alley spread of yours is a catch-all for half the cows on my ranch, sooner or later. If we were to let them drift—"

"Then don't. Hire more hands. You're working the tails off your punchers anyhow. But keep off the Fiddleback."

Shepley's mouth set like cement. He swung his horse and moved off. Derrick went with him.

Sheriff Mulcare frowned, groped for a cigar, finally squatting on his heels while

Tom Cardiff, making no point of it, pulled a match from the picket-fence of birdeyes under his hatband and tossed it to him. Mulcare said, "Some plain talk, Duffy. You're gallows bait. And you're damn' bad for Cardiff."

His glance slanted to Tom. "Cryin' over spilt milk will get you nothing but red eyes. You got run out by Snaketrack. So did six or eight men as big as you. They've gone along to try it again in a country where the land titles aren't so foggy. In ten years, they'll have their starts again. You'll have nothing but a nice collection of hair bridles over in Cell Thirteen in Salem. And even Rae ain't going to hang around ten years waiting for you."

Cardiff didn't look at Rae, but he knew the gray-blue eyes would be on him, full of challenge. The sheriff's was a twice-told tale.

"You've got me and Duffy all wrong," he said. "We're just trappers, Ira. Getting by, that's all."

In swift impatience, Rae exclaimed, "Oh, don't be so smart with Ira! If you have a friend in the world, it's him. He's just trying to tell you that you either make your peace with society or they put you away. But nobody ever put society away."

"Some of them," said Duffy, "have had a lot of fun trying."

Mulcare arose. "But they've hung just as high in the end." He mounted and rode his horse by them. "Whether you know it or not, you've about played the string out. Either Shepley or me is going to get you, unless you get wise and move out."

CHAPTER TWO

Where Trails Divide

BRANDER threw the old pelts back into the shed. "Getting warm up here, boys," he said.

"It'll cool off," Duffy assured him. "What makes Snaketrack so tough is what makes it a lamb for shearing. It's too big for Shepley to watch everything at once. I figure we've got until snow to finish our cut."

"Or until they catch Owl Rawson," Rae sniffed. "And he snitches."

Cardiff watched the bright recklessness in Duffy's eyes. "Just one thing I want to know: If they get in rifle range again, do you shoot, or don't you?"

Duffy smiled. "You're too peaceful to last in this business, Tom. But to please you—I don't."

"Good. Because the next time a shot is fired, we're done."

"And somebody else, that's done," said Uncle Red, "is me. Ever you boys go to the smoke again, don't come around here looking for grub or horses. All I'm getting out of this is satisfaction—the fun of knowing it's costing Shepley money to run that ranch."

Tom took his bridle from a peg. "I'm going up to Smoky," he said.

"What for?" Duffy frowned. Old Smoky was the lookout peak behind Uncle Red's home place.

"I figure this is the best break we've had in weeks. They're going home and cry in their whiskey over this. We'd be damned fools not to go to work."

Duffy frowned in quick displeasure, but

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a moment later he grinned. "Why not?" Rae said, "Tom." She went into the cabin.

In the cabin gloom, fragrant with supper smells, she held him by the shoulders. "Where's it going to end, Tom?" she said.

Tom's hands fitted to the supple wand of her waist. "For me," he said, "over on Crooked River somewhere. They record their titles there. They don't let whistle-stop railroads build a few miles of tracks to grab off section rights and peddle them to range hogs like Coke Shepley. I'm going over there one of these days and buy myself an iron."

"With stolen money?"

He shrugged. "I figure five thousand is what they owe me. I'm going after it, Rae. When I've got it I'll quit."

She looked at him, the moisture bright in her eyes. "No, Tom. You'll quit when they catch you. The first five thousand will be so easy it would be foolish to quit. And some day they'll corner you."

Tom said, "That's Duff you're talking about. When I leave here, I'll leave in a new wagon, and I won't leave alone."

Rae came softly against him. "I hope not! Oh, I hope not, Tom!"

* * *

That night twenty-three Snaketrack steers walked up the hard trail to Saddleback and descended to the wildness of rivers, trees and blind canyons which lay between John Day Valley and the desert. It was the fattest herd Cardiff and Gaines had taken across the mountains. It would be worth over five hundred dollars to Owl Rawson.

They left them in a dead end canyon and the following afternoon camped at Manzanita Spring. The spring was at the foot of a long rack of golden wall.

In a thicket of bullberry there was an old five-gallon lard can. Out of it, after darkness came, they took four hundred dollars in gold, which they divided. They studied a map with an X on it and the words: *The eighteenth*.

The next herd was to be left at Gooseberry Spring on the eighteenth of the month. The gold was payment for the last herd.

That night they ate pan-fried trout and fried potatoes, with a gallon of coffee to

settle it. They had a pint which they killed. Cardiff talked about the ranch he was going to buy. After a time Duffy said, "Let's see your Colt, Tom." He inspected the Frontier model .45. "Ought to file that sight off," he said. "And you've got a trigger pull a blacksmith couldn't squeeze off. I could fix this thing up for you."

"What for?"

Duffy tossed the gun back. Seated there cross-legged, he made a quick gesture at his side. His gun was in his hand, the silver ring of the barrel winking at Cardiff, a grin on Duffy's beard-fringed face.

"That's what for! Don't fool yourself. If it ever comes to a showdown between you and them, you'll have that thing in your hand before you know it."

"If it comes to that," said Cardiff, "I'll go out with my hands up. I'm no gunfighter. I'm a cowman."

"You were a cowman," Gaines said lazily. "... Ever been in the Owyhee country? Fat cattle, lazy ranchers. We could make a killing there, Tom, when we're through here."

The ruddy mist of the campfire scattered. Cardiff went to shake out his bedroll. "Get this straight," he said. "When we're through here, I'm through."

THROUGH that shining, warm fall they inflicted their quiet damnation on Coke Shepley.

The cowman put gun-guards on his Dog Creek pasture; and that was the night Pine Creek gave up another couple of dozen cows. He started his fall beef round-up at the eastern end of his blanket of grassland, and by the time the work was half finished he had lost a hundred and fifty Herefords from the west end. In desperation he organized a posse of fifteen punchers and started up into the hills to hunt for the slightest shred of evidence to jail Cardiff and Gaines.

He got as far as Indian Spring when he ran up against Uncle Red Brander. Uncle Red said, "Coming to dicker for my ranch, Shepley? Price has gone to twenty-two thousand, now."

Shepley rode back.

He was up against something called hatred. There was not a man in his crew he could trust entirely. Many had worked

for old John Day outfits. They talked in the saloons and their talk came to the ears of Tom Cardiff, who knew how to use such information.

As the herds came oftener, the mysterious entity named Owl Rawson fell behind in his payments to them. By his rough bookkeeping, Cardiff was ahead twenty-two hundred dollars cash, plus another twenty-eight hundred coming from Rawson. At this point they found a strange note in the lard can.

Give me another two weeks and I can get a better price. Okay?

Okay, Duffy Gaines wrote.

But Cardiff objected. "He may be taking off with everything!"

Duffy smiled. "If he was that stripe, we'd never have collected on the first herd. He's square, Tom."

It was Cardiff's first contact with the thing called honor among thieves.

They delivered three final bunches at the indicated spots, never meeting the man. But now at last it was getting dangerous in John Day Valley. They had a cryptic note from Rawson saying he was leaving as soon as he had collected for the last herd and made the split with them. Pressure was being put on Sheriff Mulcare by ranchers who feared their cattle might be next.

Rawson's final payoff was due on the fifteenth of October. But on that cold autumn day the lard can was empty when they visited the spring. There were no words to express the uneasiness Tom felt. He heard Duffy's insistence that Owl was trustworthy as they came. But now he began to wonder if this were a furtive game of odd-man, with Cardiff the man to be flipped out by the other two. . . .

Duffy said, "We'll camp here till he shows up." They picked a spot a quarter-mile above Manzanita Spring, where they could watch it. They spent three days there, playing poker and drawing out meals and such chores as shaving as long as they could, but the tension in them drew out like a piano wire. On the last night Duffy suddenly threw a tin cup at a rock in an explosion of savage impatience.

"The damned long-looper's gone and got himself drunk somewhere! More'n likely in John Day. Tom, we've got to

make sure. We've lost plenty time here!"

"How?"

Tom watched him stare into the small fire, his face rutted with worry. "We've got to go in and see for ourselves. If he's talked to the wrong men, we're slated to ride. If he ain't talked yet, we'll haul him out of town. Or maybe he ain't there at all."

DUFFY got his carbine and a can of oil. He took a small cleaning rag and began to clean the gun with the scrupulous care of a watchmaker. He laid it aside, then, and gave his Colt the same treatment.

Cardiff watched these procedures. "Figuring on doing some hunting?" he asked finally.

Duffy's eyes were evasive. "Dust will ruin a good gun," he declared.

"Two days' dust? You oiled those the night we got here."

Quietly, his eyes on Cardiff, Duffy slipped a shell into the carbine. He said drily, "Listen, Tom. You steer by your lights and I'll steer by mine."

Tom rose to his feet and regarded the tough-featured man across the fire. "A partnership's only got one set of lights to steer by!" he snapped. "If you go in decorated up with hardware and keeping your back to walls, I get the eye put on me, too. We're going in there like two town-hungry trappers looking for fun. We have a couple of drinks and then we drop in on Mulcare. We don't go in looking like a couple of gunslingers waiting for trouble."

"You're talking big, Tom. You're talking like this outfit has a ramrod, and it's you." Duffy's eyes were heatless and casual. He stood with the carbine held lightly in his hands.

Cardiff suddenly knew of how perilous a stuff this friendship was. He said quietly, "Use it, Duff. See if you can get into action faster than I can."

Duffy Gaines didn't take his eyes from Tom's face, but Tom knew he was figuring odds, weighing his chances of raising the barrel before Tom could hit him, and they were only four feet apart.

"It'd be close," Cardiff said. "But it wouldn't be a tie. The way it looks to me, we've got enough grief without manu-

facturing it out of too many whiskeys and three days of poker. I'm not asking you to go in with your hands up. I say we walk in and read the sign first. If you don't like it, take off. But I'll play it Mulcare's way."

Duffy suddenly smiled and let the butt of the gun rest on the ground. "All right, Tom. Maybe it's camp fever. But I hope Shepley don't let you down by hollering for a hangnoose party."

* * *

It was a two-day trip to John Day. On the way they picked up Uncle Red, who was taking a packhorse load of peltries to trade for supplies. Coming down into the valley, they saw the brand of winter on it. Only a patina of green was left in the bottoms, shading up into brown and gold on the grassy north slopes that rambled up into hills the color and shape of Irish potatoes. It was a placidly tranquil day, but the beauty of it exploded for them when they rode into town.

Through a jungle of miners' shacks, clotheslines, backhouses and picket fences they came into the narrow canyon of the street, shaped by false-fronted wooden buildings and solid structures of tawny volcanic tuff. Golden poplars picketed the street like yellow plumes.

They reached Benteen's Feed Yard, and here for the first time saw the little crowd in the street before the jail. Duffy's hard brown eyes flinched. "I got a notion," he said softly, "where we might find Owl."

Mulcare spotted them as they rode toward the jail. He waded through the slim crowd of miners, punchers and townsmen. "Want a talk with you two," he told them tartly.

There was a pumping in Cardiff's throat. Suddenly he had been thrown headlong into the room he had avoided investigating, the small chamber called *trapped*, at the end of the dark corridor he had been following for nearly a year. It was a frightening place of unsteady floor and encroaching walls. It was one thing to have your guilt thrown at you, confess it and accept the penalty. It was another not to know whether you were trapped or not; to try to behave like any other man in a

puzzling spot until you were sure. . . .

Mulcare took them to a cell of the odor and temperature of winter mud. Here were Sam Derrick, Coke Shepley, and a third man who leaned by one elbow on the high windowsill and chewed a slow cud of tobacco. His left arm was in a sling. He gave them a look of gruff disinterest, a short and chunky man with a brown face full of seams and a half-inch spiny brown beard on his jowls.

Cardiff grunted. "The one by the window looks honest, Ira. What are the others in for—horse-stealin'?"

The man by the window laughed softly. "They're my lawyers, brother."

Cardiff observed Mulcare peering into his face. He appeared disappointed. Mulcare said, "Know this fellow, Cardiff?" "Never seen him."

Shepley's voice was a modified shout, laden with liquor and victory. "Not for a couple of weeks, you ain't. This is the sin-pimpled sheepherder you've been selling your stolen beef to!"

Owl Rawson took one step from the window and his fist collided with Shepley's mouth. Shepley went back against the cot and stumbled away, his lip split. "Just a cow-thief, Shepley, not a sheepherder."

Mulcare's eyes glinted with good-humor. Shepley was fingering his Colt but the sheriff said, "Maybe you'd better keep out of it, Coke, till you sober up. We've been on the trail for three days, boys. Caught Owl with some stolen beef out near Harney Lake. What I was wondering was, do you want to talk now, or after Owl turns state's evidence to get his sentence reduced?"

Duffy sighed and grinned at Cardiff. "Still beating the same old tom-tom. I could use a drink. How about you?"

Tom smiled at Mulcare, feeling that the worst was over; that he had come through it. "Let us know if you want us again, Ira. We're pretty busy."

Coke Shepley stood by the door, his meaty face blotched. "If there's any way a rustler can be hung in the state of Oregon," he said, "hanging's what you two are going to do."

Tom grinned in his face and went by, but he heard Duffy pause to say, "Good luck, Rawson. If it was Snaketrack beef,

I hope you draw a ten-dollar fine, suspended."

In a momentary hush, Cardiff heard Rawson say, "Not a chance. It's the other fellers that always has the luck."

THEY had a whiskey in the Pound Diggings Bar, and here Duffy breathed, cupping his glass in his large palm, "Get that about others fellers having the luck? That means us. Six thousand dollars, in a can at Manzanita Spring."

Tom let the whiskey slide over his tongue, relief shaking his fingers. "And what if he talks? They'll be waiting for us when we walk in."

"Owl don't talk."

Tom thought about Owl Rawson as they left town. How deep did honor go in a man? They said every man had his price. Would he inform on them for a year off his sentence? Or for five?

As they started up Pine Creek, Duffy said, "If he could get at the likker, we'd have reason to worry. His jaw comes unhinged when he oils it. But nobody's going to pass any liquor around *that* jail."

That night, at Brander's, after supper, Tom walked with Rae. She was a gentle, disturbing presence beside him as they sat on a boulder in the pasture and heard the sleepy woods sounds behind them. He felt like a man seeing something he had long desired but not being able to touch. He was closer to having Rae and his ranch on Crooked River than he had ever been. But in another sense he was farther.

"He was the man, wasn't he?" she said. "Will he tell Mulcare about you and Duffy?"

"Duffy doesn't think so."

She pulled away from him. "You're fine for making a girl declare herself."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I want to know where you and I stand! I could get other men, Tom Cardiff!"

Tom laughed and pulled her against him. "Not while I'm around." His voice got a little hard. "Does it look easy? Just pull up stakes and drift? I wish it was. But what if they come after me some day?"

"You know the answer to that. I could

run the ranch for a couple of years."

"What if I can't buy a ranch?"

Her eyes were dark. "Tom, you won't go back to it!"

He shook his head. "Owl's paid off, but we haven't collected yet. Collecting may take a while."

She gripped his hands. "Tom, we can do it with what you have! You'll work a while. We'll start out small."

"We'll be starting out small on six thousand. On what I've got now, we couldn't start." He kissed the small, grave face. "If it was worth risking my neck for, it's worth going after. It'll be our last ride. Then Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Cardiff head west."

They stayed around the ranch a few days, but a mood of urgency grew in Duffy Gaines. "If he's going to talk," he told Tom one night, "we ought to have the money salted away before they get it. It won't spoil while you're in."

"While I'm in?"

"I'm moving on, as soon as I pull my arm out of that lard bucket. And it's going to be tomorrow."

Tom reflected on Shepley's sort of craft, and the sheriff's straightforward methods, and said after an instant, "All right, tomorrow, then."

They decided against pack horses, cramming their saddlebags with canned sardines, coffee bars and hardtack—the sort of things a man might take who expected to be caught out for a couple of days. They climbed the first ridge and found a rime of frost over everything. They tilted over into the deep and echoing valley. All that day they rode, at twilight coming into the pocket of low hills where Manzanita Spring was hidden. They dismounted by the old campfire and Duffy strode into the bullberry thicket. Tom was right behind him, so that he saw, at the same instant, that the lard bucket had been overturned.

DUFFY was facing him, his Colt in his hand. For a second Cardiff was rigid, expecting the blast of the gun. Then he saw that the outlaw's eyes were staring beyond the thicket, rummaging among the rocks. Tom turned, too, but there was no flash of movement, no scrap of sound.

Presently Duffy jammed his gun into the holster. Tom passed him and went to one knee by the cache. With an exclamation, he pulled a chamois sack from it, drew the puckered top open and let the gold-pieces spill onto his palm. The breath went deeply into him.

"Owl hasn't talked yet, anyway! A bear must have turned the can over."

There was a slickness of sweat on Duffy's face. He thrust back from the thicket. Beside the dead campfire they counted the money. They were fifty-two hundred dollars in gold. Owl Rawson had been, in his way, a man of scrupulous honesty. Tom placed his half of the gold in his money belt. Then, in the thickening dusk, they faced each other.

It was one of those moments of poignancy, when something dies which has been rude and dangerous, but of the cloth of adventure. Their palms met and Duffy grinned. "Well, pard—"

There was a scuff of iron shoes down-canyon. They tore away to confront the sound. A file of horsemen came into sight, riding slowly. It was too dark to make out their faces. The men by the ashes broke for their ponies, mounted and heard the horsemen ringing up down-trail.

A man spoke gruffly. "I still make it he came in this-away to get the cattle." It was Mulcare's voice.

Another man said, "But the cans were ten miles west. I say we're following a wrong trail."

Tom sat his saddle, afraid to move. Duffy held his carbine at the ready. Now the riders swung their ponies again and the sheriff's voice came wearily. "There's a spring yonder. We'd as well camp."

Coke Shepley rode at the sheriff's side, saying harshly, "If you'd have shook a rope at him, like I wanted, we'd know where we were going. He'd have blabbed quick enough."

"Would he?" the sheriff snapped.

Cardiff wheeled his pony and put the spurs to it. Slashing through the brush, he plunged up the slope into the jackpines. Someone shouted, and there was a yell from Duffy, and then he was slicing in beside Tom as the ponies lunged up the hillside.

A gun roared. In the pouring echoes,

Mulcare bawled. "Hold your damned fire till you're fired on!"

They were coming along the base of the slope, paralleling Cardiff's direction. Duffy was sticking close. Below, another gun roared. There was commotion behind Tom. He heard Duffy fighting his horse, but when he looked back the pony was already down, threshing wildly. The blood on its neck was a glistening welter. Duffy called, "Tom!"

They had said they would split up if ever it came to gunfire. They would take their chances alone. That was one of those things so easily said; but only a man with the heart of a tax collector could carry them out. Up the slope came the man who had fired the shot, a big heavy-set cowman riding a percheron of a horse. It was Coke Shepley. He had a Winchester in his hand. Shepley burst past a screen of brush, and suddenly, seeing Duffy, he leveled the gun.

Duffy fired one shot. The rancher lurched as though he had been struck by a fist. He dropped his gun and the split-reins fell. The pony began to pitch. Shepley went over the cantle and landed like a bag of wheat among the rocks.

Duffy rushed past him, caught Tom about the waist and swung up behind. Then slanted on up the slope.

AS THEY rode, driving clumsily through the brush, backing and switching to the rimrocks, Duffy kept pumping shots downhill, unaimed slugs designed to slow pursuit. The point of Mulcare's charge had been blunted. In the jackpines, men moved cautiously and called to one another. They had no way of knowing yet whether they were up against a dozen men from Owl Rawson's bunch or merely the two they had been seeking.

Gaining altitude, Cardiff let the pony work its way northward into the heart of the hills, in the direction of the ridge. Darkness filled the valley like a lake. They halted to listen and to blow the horse. Far below, a confused medley of ringing hoofs and men's voices told where the posse was bogged down by darkness. Tom felt Duffy's body relax.

"Pardner," Duffy said, "you shoulda clubbed me off. But it's too late now."

"Nobody ever accused me of being smart," Tom admitted. "But this time it was kill or get killed."

"I'm a cow-thief, not a philosopher," Duffy chuckled. "Let's you and I git."

They pushed on through the dark. From a long familiarity with the hills, Cardiff knew where they were. He was working up the backbone of the mountains, from which he could select a dozen trails to take them east to Idaho, south to the desert. The darkness enclosed them like a black sack. It was too dark for the horse to be sure of its footing, and suddenly it stumbled and went to its knees.

Duffy slid off. Cardiff dismounted as the horse came up. He led it a few yards along the trail. They studied it as a surgeon might observe the first steps of a convalescent. They looked at each other and Duffy said, "Might as well camp. Can't ride all night."

They put the horse on a patch of grass and made a dry camp behind a thorny tangle of buckbrush. They ate hardtack and sardines, and listened to the night. Miles to the southwest they discerned a pinpoint of light.

They were sober, not talking about it, but both gravely examining the problem. It could be stated in only one fashion: A lame horse couldn't carry two men out of the mountains.

* * *

They stood two-hour watches until the gray pre-dawn. In the heatless light Duffy's face was the color of cement. "Got to move, Tom," he said suddenly. "Where we at?"

"About six miles from Brander's"

Duffy's eyes sharpened. "Going to pick up horses?"

"Don't be a damned fool," Tom said. "Red told us last time: No horses if there's shooting. It'd make him an accessory if Mulcare took us on one of his plugs."

"One lame horse can't carry us out of here!" Duffy snapped.

"No. But it might be able to carry one of us out."

Duffy sat stolidly with the rifle across his lap. "I can't guess which one that'd be."

"You give a man credit for a lot, don't

you?" Tom said. His eyes grew hard. Duffy grinned. "Maybe I'd better let you do the talking."

Tom pulled a coin from his pocket. "Heads, you've got a horse," he said. Duffy watched the coin, his eyes varnished with eagerness. Tom sent it up in a shining arc. It came down in the dirt between them, bounded once and was still.

Tails. He looked up.

He was looking into the barrel of Duffy Gaines' carbine. Duffy's face was grave. "You don't need the hoss like I do, Tom. You only stole some cattle. I killed a man. Let's have your Colt."

Cardiff pulled his Colt carefully and tossed it to Duffy. Duffy unloaded it and threw it ten feet away. He got up cautiously. "I'll leave you some chuck, boy."

He got the horse and mounted, never taking his eyes off Tom, and brought the limping horse back. Its knee was badly swollen. "Tom, I'm sorry. But this horse will carry me to Brander's and a couple of new mounts, and that's all that will ever stand between me and a hangrope."

He let one of the saddlebags fall to the ground. Tom watched him swing away. "Uncle Red was right," he said. "You've got the wolf sign on you. I hope the horse falls and you break your damned neck."

Duffy rode off, laughing.

CHAPTER THREE

One Last Shell

TOM CARDIFF loaded the gun again, put some hardtack in his pockets and stood a moment weighing the problem before he moved.

Duffy was striking out on their old trail to Red's. It would carry him six miles by the roundabout horse trail, avoiding the slides. It was barely four miles across the saddle. Tom couldn't see that horse carrying a man much faster than he himself could walk.

These days Uncle Red kept his horses in the trap. He had brought all the stock down from summer pasture; knowing the set of things, he also kept an eye on them.

If Gaines tried to rope a horse out of that pasture there would be a fight.

Tom took a long sight down the valley.

Far below he saw the white smoke of trail dust as the posse moved along the night-old tracks. He turned and started quickly after Duffy.

His money belt was a solid, clinking weight about his waist. He might have to unload it before he made Brander's, like a desert rat abandoning his load of rocks in favor of survival. He thought, And if he kills me, there'll be another lost gold mine for them to dream about. . . . It was the way legends started. Like the legend of Billy the Kid, or maybe Duffy Gaines, or even Tom Cardiff, the badman of the Blues.

These things made good campfire windies, but when you came close to them all the magic rubbed off. You were a hungry, unshaven cowpuncher wishing he'd lived a better life. You were stumbling along on boots not meant for climbing, wishing you had some of that gun skill outlaws bragged of.

All he was sure of was that he had got Rae and Uncle Red into this, and he must head Gaines off before he tried to bulldoze Red into giving him a horse, because Brander took orders about as easily as a mule pushed.

Rising higher, the sun began to dissolve some of the mountain chill, but the clear, thin air nipped Tom's face and hands. He caught glimpses of Duffy's horse a mile west of him. The horse was making poor time. Tom left the trail and mounted through tall stands of fir and open areas of gray, sun-cured grass. In an hour he was breasting the jagged rocks and wind-warped trees of the divide. Distantly, he saw the golden ham-shaped valley on Pine Creek. He took a short rest, sitting on the ground to ease his feet and get his breath. His money belt and cartridge belt had doubled their weight. They dragged at him as he clambered up again. He started down the first rib of timber toward the John Day.

The regular trail was hidden from sight by a long peninsula of the mountains. He saw no more of Duffy Gaines as he worked down. It was easy going on the gravelly down slope. He crossed one of Uncle Red's summer pastures and saw that all the stock had been moved below. Duffy would be searching every pasture he passed for possible mounts.

Now he came in sight of the sprawl of buildings, the log cabin and the stone spring house, the outsheds and corrals. They lay four hundred yards below him. He saw Rae splitting kindling by the back door, slim and dark-haired, a girl to grace any man's home, and his heart tightened in him. In one of the corrals, Brander was sacking a half-trained bronc. It was a sturdy, white-stockinged bay, the kind of horse a man like Duffy would kill to acquire.

Red Brander had built his cabin in the heart of the meadow, back in the day when the Snakes were inclined to make sudden forays on isolated ranches. That way he had a clear view for a couple of hundred yards in any direction. Tom Cardiff left the trees and started across the meadow.

He had gone fifty yards when he heard a tinkle of spurs across the pasture from him. He saw Duffy come into sight from a nest of rocks. He was dismounted, and now Tom glimpsed a saddle lying among the rocks. So the horse had given way after all. Even so, Duffy had beaten him. There was no telling how long he'd been lying among the rocks, waiting until it was safe to move out.

Tom paced toward the cabin, his eye on the outlaw, who had seen him. Suddenly he yelled, "Inside!"

FOR the first time Rae noticed them. She saw the glitter of their rifles. Turning quickly, she stepped back into the cabin, and they could hear her screaming, "Pop!" Tom couldn't take his eyes off Duffy long enough to see how Red was reacting. He changed his course to walk directly toward the outlaw.

They were about seventy-five yards apart now. Tom called to him, "Give it up, Duff. That's one hoss you ain't going to ride."

Duffy kept pacing toward the cabin, a large, black-haired man in a ragged shirt and patched chaps, his hatbrim pinned up cavalry style. When he was within a hundred and fifty feet, he said, "I'm having that hoss, Tom. If you got to do somebody a good turn, talk Uncle Red out of it for me."

Tom said sardonically, "We'll flip a coin for it."

Gaines wasn't grinning; all the grin was out of him. He continued to move with a cowboy's short strides. Suddenly he dived at the ground.

Tom fired, but he had been outmaneuvered: His ball went high. He fell, swinging the loading lever of the Remington deeply, striking the sunburned grass and hearing the roar of Duffy's gun. Sweet-smelling and deep, the grass parted as the bullet went by with a singing sound.

Fear was screaming in Tom's head. He didn't want to kill—but even more, he didn't want to be killed. His flesh cried out against the rape of a bullet. Gaines was prideful of that gun of his and the way he could fire it. He had another shot off before Tom raised for his shot; and a third came from the carbine a shell-clink behind the second.

And suddenly it came to Tom. *The big galoot's as scared as I am!* Battle disease. It gave Tom six inches greater stature to realize this, and he tensed down and brought his fingers under control, and waited for a fourth shot, into the echoes of which he could send his bullet.

But Duffy now lay perfectly still. He was out of sight of Tom, and Tom was damned if he'd rear up out of the deep bunch-grass to find him. Somewhere in the cabin Red Brander was shouting, but the blooming roar of his Sharps didn't come. Duffy had seen to it that he flopped near a little mound of lava rocks gathered from the meadow and heaped there, so that he was sheltered from the cabin.

Tom allowed a full minute to pass. Then his hand groped about until it found a chunk of porous red stone. He braced and gave it a short roll through the grass.

Without warning, the grass parted to another blasting shot. Cardiff instantly raised his head and shoulders and saw Duffy crouching there, the loading lever of his gun down. It was like taking unfair advantage to shoot. But he was firing at

a man who would not even abide by the primitive law of a tossed coin.

He fired carefully, taking his time, seeing the outlaw through his sights—the loading piece snapping home, the carbine coming up with wicked speed. Then Duffy was hidden by a hot vapor of smoke. The grass stirred. When the smoke cleared, Duffy was leaning on one arm. His gun had fallen. His head drooped and slowly he bent forward.

Tom ran quickly to stand beside him. Duffy was dying. His mute eyes said that. Tom said, "I'm sorry, Duff. . . ."

But it was really less of an apology to Duffy Gaines than to the man he thought Duffy had been.

MULCARE could bungle a job of tracking when his heart was in it: That was the only way Tom could figure the fact that it was early afternoon before the posse strung across the pasture. Duffy lay in the meadow under a tarpaulin. Tom's injured horse had come limping in an hour before Mulcare arrived.

Dusty and angry, he hit the ground and stomped up on the porch. He stood there with his gun cradled, scrutinizing the trio on the porch. He began to shout.

"I expect you don't know anything about it, eh, Cardiff! You ride in on the horse we trailed, carrying Gaines in your arms, but you don't know a thing about it."

Sam Derrick stopped at the foot of the steps, held there by Brander's sharp stare. The rest of the posse were punchers Tom knew, hand-me-downs from old John Day spreads. They looked worried.

"Where's Gaines?" Mulcare snapped.

"In the pasture," Rae said quietly. "Tom had to kill him. He tried to steal a horse from us."

"Cardiff just happened along, eh?"

Tom stirred, frowning at the cigarette

(Please turn to page 96)



I'LL LIVE—and DIE—

Gripping Novelette of Gallant Southerners

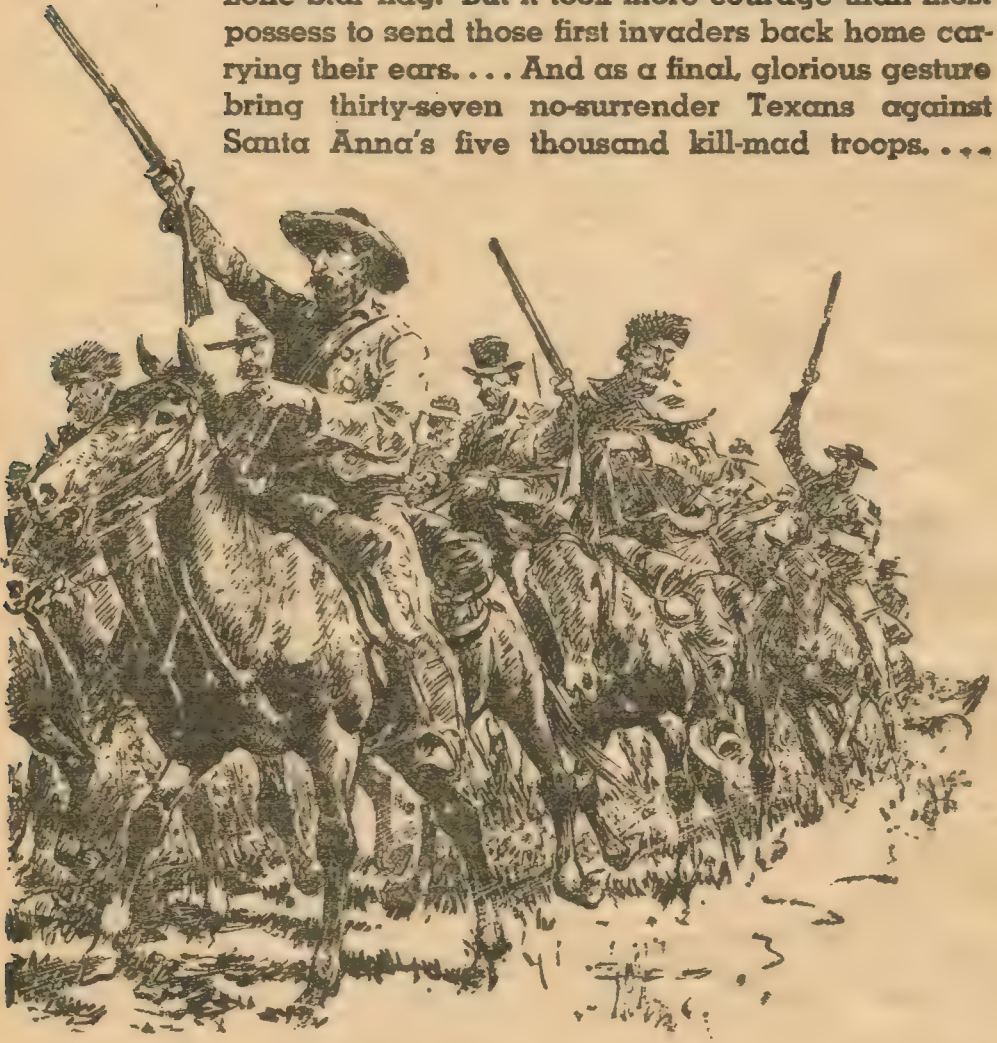


At dawn they rode out to
give heart and aid to Bow-
ie's dispirited men.

FOR TEXAS!

By THOMAS
CALVERT

The men of Gonzales wanted freedom under the Lone Star flag. But it took more courage than most possess to send those first invaders back home carrying their ears. . . . And as a final, glorious gesture bring thirty-seven no-surrender Texans against Santa Anna's five thousand kill-mad troops. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Hounds of Mexico

LATE of afternoon the two riders came down Twenty Mile Grade through the year's end browns and russet reds and grays, and stopping at the fork to Comminger's ranch, Clegg Marion allowed, "Wasn't so damned long

ago a man had to look twice at every bush to be sure it wasn't a Comanche. Now he's got to watch every rider to see it ain't one of Santa Anna's jail rats on the prod!"

"Well," Doc Comminger grunted with victory's excitement still a keen edge on his deep voice, "we're slowing 'em down. Them two today ain't going to ride back with their own ears in their teeth without

spreading word that every man in Texas is biggern gawdamighty—with the devil thrown in!"

Clegg Marion felt of his damaged left arm and scowled. "I dunno as this damned dry and dreary land is worth it! Especially with yore hoss doctoring on a man."

"Why, that was a right pert job I did of patching you up with jist a pocket rawhide awl to work with!" Doc growled. He studied Marion. "But even my doctoring ain't holding you in the country, Clegg."

"I dunno what holds a man," Clegg answered and the thought brought puzzlement shimmering against his somber self-containment. "Mebbe my old lady's right. Mebbe it's just a man's sheer cussedness to see how long he can take a country's poverty and heat and devilment."

He gestured at the drab, monotonous, haze-filled distance. "It sure ain't on account of the purty creeks and neat green pastures!"

"No," Comminger admitted, thinking of Clegg's gentle Virginian wife. "But there's one thing sure about bringing a woman into this sandtank: if she don't split yore head open with a broadax first month, it is mighty sure she loves you, mister!"

The two grinned, lifted their hands in gratification with the day's doings, and turned along their separate trails. Clegg's arm felt numb and feverish from the knifing he'd taken, but he was still filled with a man's deep, gritty elation at besting and turning back two more of Santa Anna's brutal jail pack. Killing was too good for that vicious breed. There was grim satisfaction in sending killers crawling back minus a piece or two to show the arrogant dictator a more arrogant Texan contempt.

He reached another trail above his ranch where Manueto, the mestizo boy, should be waiting with a bag of desert plants, but wasn't. He damned him and eased his seat in the saddle while he waited.

A white sun burned its way back through a thick, colorless sky and put its rays slashing down upon the drab autumn land. Suddenly the rays began to jump

like the hands of a clock, each jump a little richer with evening's vibrant pastel colors. He used the sign for a clock and damned the boy a second time, cutting for prints in the yellow brown dust of the fork and suddenly understanding as the light picked out the sharp-edged gouge a horse makes starting out of a dead stand into a dead run.

The boy had been there and waited already, but something he saw had started him for the ranch full tilt, and he was not the kind to abuse a horse with that kind of start unnecessarily.

Clegg thought of the two drifting Santa Anna badmen earlier that day, and his flesh turned gray beneath the dark burn of these far southern suns. He clapped spurs to his pony, putting it headlong down the grade, and swung through the gate with a rip of dust scudding after him into the yard.

He haunched his horse, cursing inwardly with temper at what he saw. A sturdy but badly cared for pony was tethered at his front hitch rack, and a trail-grimed Mexican was hunkered against the outside of the kitchen eating and jabbering while his wife stood in the doorway.

HE SHOT the horse a second scrutiny, and had no doubt of what the stranger was. The animal had been top branded and its mark switched, but it was a Mexican army horse as clear as daylight. Taking the Mexican's measure, he didn't like his looks much better. The man had a cunning, greasy look, and he was not hunkered with the relaxed appearance that he gave.

Clegg Marion's wife looked out at him with distress marking her sensitive, wholesome face. "Clegg!" she called. "This man escaped from Santa Anna and says he's headed up this way with twenty thousand soldiers!"

Clegg lifted from his saddle and hit dirt in one unbroken movement. He was tall and usually lanky looking, but he took on bulk with the angry purpose of his long stride. "Santa Anna never saw the day he could keep twenty thousand men from deserting!" he bit out, and drew back his gloved hand and smashed the Mexican's plate flying.

The man's fawning smile turned smol-

dering and watchful. He slid upward against the wall, balanced, poised, quiet, dangerous as a snake.

"He escaped all right!" Clegg ground out. "Just like two of his friends we ran across today. Escaped from the jail at Cabezo with Santa Anna's sayso!"

"But señor," the man pleaded on a false liquid note, and spread his hands. Spread them, raising them to chest height with the gesture, Clegg noted.

"Shut up!" the rancher commanded. He threw a flashing glance of blazing anger at his wife. "You'd best go inside," he advised.

His gaze riveted upon the Mexican again. "What do you claim you did before the Bloody Red Dictator corralled you?"

"Vaquero, cabellero, señor, or just a simple peon—" the man started with his fawning voice.

Clegg's steel-corded hand whipped out and caught the other's wrist. He turned his hand palm up, almost crippled it with the violence of his anger, and threw it from him as if it were something unattached. "Not an honest callous on yore dirty hoof!" he rasped. "Not a mark that was not made by reins or gun or knife!"

He drew off his right hand and slapped the man's face with an explosion like a pistol shot. The man tautened and flinched, but did not cringe or whine. He stood there quietly balanced, no fool and not making a movement, but with hatred flicking in his eyes like a snake's tongue. Muscles pulled the flesh of his upper lip mean and quivering as a cornered coyote's.

Clegg wheeled him by the shoulder and gave him a rough shove toward his pony. "Vamoose muy pronto!" he grated. "Don't stop this side of the Nueces! And tell the general you were damned lucky to get back at all!"

The man lurched on his worn high caballero heels but caught his balance and turned his head with lips peeled back in a nasty smile. "Sí, señor," he purred. "The general may some day stoop to thank you personally!"

The Mexican's hand reached toward his hat, but suddenly darted back past his neck toward his shoulder blades as he twisted from the hips. Fast, but not as fast as Clegg switched his coiled bullwhip

to his good hand, snapping it out to explode its loaded tip on the man's forehead.

The man staggered back and the whip barked again. For two full minutes it cracked methodically until its bark turned soggy and finally drowned in the man's moans.

The man had crawled to a corner of the distant saddle shed, and Clegg stooped to frisk him deftly. A knife up his arm, one under his armpit, one between his shoulders, a derringer in his vest pocket, an open gun, and a different kind of knife in each boot. Clegg emptied the open gun and threw it back at the gasping man. The other items he appropriated, turning with them to find Manuelo nearby, on the alert with big eyes and a cocked carbine.

The mestizo boy said apologetically, "Señor Clegg, I could not do anything but watch after Dona Maria offered him food!"

A hard smile broke briefly across Clegg's anger. He knuckled the gaunt boy under his lean jaw and slapped the booty into his hand, save one silver-handled knife from the man's boot.

"See this coyote gets started south with bells on!" he ordered.

"Sí, Don Clegg!" The boy grinned with anticipation and his soft eyes turned cruel and secret with the timeless memories of his Comanche blood.

Clegg stood a space biting down the raw anger in him, then moved with restraint into the house. His wife stood by the living room table Clegg had hewn and wrought for her himself, her back stiff as a ramrod, her hands dead white knots by her side.

HE STOPPED, opened his mouth and closed it without sound and stared helplessly at the rammed earth floor. It was the woman who broke the silence. Without turning she demanded edgedly, "Couldn't you even stand your own wife enjoying a little outside gossip without your permission for it, Clegg?"

He raised his shaggy head and stared back at her with amazement. "You think that's why I did it?"

"Why else?" she countered on a tight note. "He was hungry and out of water and he called in first, but you didn't even

give him a chance to tell who he was!"

He sucked a deep breath into his lungs, struggling for quiet through the shock and anger that engulfed him. "Mary," he told her, "whatever he told you he was lying. He was another of Santa Anna's scum."

She swung on him then, cold fury blazing in her eyes. "Of course you'd claim that! It gives you an excuse to gloat in cruelty. No wonder you like this brutal, savage land! There's nothing to stop you from any violence you want to commit! What harm had he done? He had not even told his story."

"I know his story from his smell," Clegg told her grimly, and sought for a way to make his meaning plain. "Mary, to understand yore man, you've got to understand the country!"

Every feeling in her resisted understanding. "It's a cruel country," she murmured. "And you've grown like it, Clegg. Harsh, suspicious, cruel—and looking for a chance to prove your power and authority."

"Have I ever been cruel with you?" he asked.

She turned her face from him with a woman's inward hurt and outrage. "Three months ago I would have said no, but now I see the way you do it. Just now you did it by picking on a harmless little man—and with a whip on top of it!"

He thought of the two harmless little men who had tried to ambush him with Doc Comminger earlier that day, and of just how harmless this third one might have been had Manuelo not come racing in. He would not put the fear in her of telling her those things, but he did shake loose the captured silver knife from a sleeve and stand looking at it quietly.

It was a carving knife, time-worn and smooth, but still bearing the Murdoch family crest, and in that raw wilderness of grass and sand was the only link his wife had left with a past of gentleness, joy and safety. Of her pitifully few heirlooms that was the one that meant most to her, and of late it had come to be almost an obsession of security.

"At least I know he was a thief," he said, and flipped the knife into the table and stood watching it quiver, a man decent enough not to look at his wife in

this moment and not to press her for contrition.

He swallowed his hard feelings at the things she'd said, and his anger that she had been so foolhardy and disobeyed his orders to throw down on and hold off any strangers. He had a homely face, deep graven, but it was touched now with honest humor.

"Always claimed," he murmured, "you should give me that to hone down for a hunting knife."

He caught the jerking intake of her breath, the catch as realization ripped through her, and felt a man's urge to take her in his arms and hold her. But he could not cross the barriers she had dropped until she made it clear that his awkward touch was wanted.

He turned out to the balcony, feeling more mixed-up than any stampede or beating had ever made him. It had all started, he guessed, the day she saw him beat up the drifter who was getting too bold with his looks and compliments. But now, in some way, she was coming to hold even the country's natural acts of violence against him personally, such as the heat wave that had kept him on range at the tag end of summer, and the cloudburst that had flooded him off from home two days.

He saw Manuelo had left the gunny-sack of cactus plants at the edge of the patio, and he fetched a bucket of water and a spade and set about planting them with the crude and awkward embarrassment of a man who has spent his life roping cattle from a saddle. It was not much of a hacienda he had fetched his childhood sweetheart down to, but against the crude and utilitarian drabness of that raw land, he was doing the best he could to make up for the things she was used to.

He had managed a red-tiled roof, which was not much, maybe, but stood out like a mansion in a land of sod-topped dugouts. He had figured and fashioned a small pool in the patio himself. Then he had realized the importance of the little pool in the small patio. Then he had realized the importance of a little green and color against the desert gauntness and that she was trying to nurse along alien plants too delicate for this hot and arid land. And he was not too proud to quietly set about

planting the things that would blossom with the spring.

He finished his job and hunkered there with a man's boyish satisfaction at his own handiwork, and colored darkly anticipating her appreciation when he heard her step upon the threshold. But she made no sound. She did not cross and put a hand upon him, and at length he swung to see her smile, but what he saw upon her face was clear as if she'd spoken out and asked wearily, "Isn't there enough of that out on the landscape?"

He straightened, swallowing down a suddenly hot somberness that filled him. "Come spring," he murmured, crestfallen, but trying to hide it, "and they'll take hold, I reckon."

She did her best. She gave a wintry smile, but there was no enthusiasm, no appreciation, in her, and there was something in her almost of resentment, as if she were remembering that when she first came he would not let her use but a bucket of water a day for the lilac roots she brought, forgetting that the spring had been almost dry right then and there was no way here of hauling water.

CHAPTER TWO

New Fighter for Gonzales

THEY had supper with evening's first purple shadows reaching down the slopes to put life into a windless day's dead airs, and watched the country shake out of its shroud of thick drab haze to stand clear and stark in pagan color and primitive, savage grandeur. This was a time of day that always caught and held her and came close to giving her an understanding and feeling for the land, and he let it work on her in silence, going out immediately after coffee to harness a team into the buckboard.

He was helping her to her seat when she first noticed the stiffness of his arm and his shirt ripped on the underside, and said with a woman's quick wiping out of grievance, "Clegg, you're hurt! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Nothing much," he answered casually. "Just a brush rip. Doc Comminger took care of it out on range."

He climbed in the other side and slapped

the reins and drove her out through the low, incoming tide of shadow slipping down Twenty Mile Grade. At this hour the country reached its glory. The shadows softened the raw harsh earth below, the sundown put out its spokes of brilliant light to edge the mesas and buttes with gold.

Unconsciously she touched his hand. "Maybe it is worth the harshness and cruelty, Clegg," she murmured. "I try hard to see it like a man."

He gave a grunt and squeezed her hand with deep relief. Thank the Lord that tantrum's over!

Dust plumes strung across the plain toward town, and shortly they were forking in with other folks and calling out sallies and greetings. He felt the lift of interest in his wife, her thirsty inward reach toward company and the security it stood for. In no time at all she was laughing and relaxed and full of plans and gossip.

He let her out at the general store, a-cackle with women on this one night each week, and racked the team and angled through the street's thick dust to El Caballo. Doc Comminger was already holding forth with the story of that day's sneak fight out in the hills.

"What you should have did was hook the greasers up by their belly skins and leave 'em for the vultures!" Abe McGrady growled.

Lanky Tallis cleaned his nails with a barlow knife. "Sooner or later the trouble's coming," he allowed. "It ain't that Mexico ever used this land much or even figured it more than wilderness. It's jist the idea of free men minding their own business and telling him to mind his that Santa Anna can't stomach."

"He ain't leading no army way up here just out of pride," McGrady growled. "But still and all, we'll be getting more and more of these deserters and spies until our legislature acts and gives Sam Houston some real authority."

"While the boys in the legislature can still guzzle whiskey and play poker at our expense?" Comminger scoffed. "Man, the politicians will be jabbering jist as long as we pay their room rent!"

He swung his gaze across to Clegg Marion and grinned. "But I reckon we

settled one score today, eh, Clegg?"

Clegg frowned and studied the deep amber color in his glass. "I dunno for sure if we're doing right or not, the way we're turning these hombres back. Mebbe we ought to move 'em along to the north and let the authorities take care of 'em."

"You gone loco or jist plain soft?" McGrady barked. "Let those coyotes roam the range one week, and they'd move off with somebody's scalp, or hoss-flesh, or whatever gold they had, you can bet!"

"Then mebbe we ought to just corral and hold em," Clegg said. "Unless they make a fight that gets 'em dead. This business of sending some hombre off holding his own ear is kind of rough when you get down to it."

McGrady swung out from the bar, pulling up his belts. "Clegg," he rasped, "that trip north didn't do yore thinking no good at all! These ain't white men, I keep telling you, and there's only one thing they understand and that is the whip. Look at the way they break their hosses! You ever see a Mex hoss gentled?"

"Well . . ." Clegg growled, not quite convinced.

"No, you didn't!" McGrady cut in. "You've seen good hossflesh beaten into lockjaw, and rode galled, and worn clean through the hoof, and with bridle cuts clean through their tongue and mouth! But you ain't never seen a Mex hoss gentled 'less it was some don's thoroughbred."

CLEGG had to concede that. Matter of fact, he had no argument with what McGrady thought or said. His argument was against mayhem that left a man himself a bad taste for what he'd done. Put the shoe on the other foot and he knew damned well it would be more than an ear a gringo would be left holding! Too many had come in from the south and west holding their own guts in their hands or raving and crazy after an hour or two spent inside a red anthill. Those were the men. When you thought of the women who'd been caught and stolen you just shut your mind and prayed to the Almighty they'd died fast. Santa Anna's men were intentionally culled from the lowest dregs he could find and his own

lust for cruelty had turned tough men sick in his own army.

Lanky Tallis drawled, "Well, I cut sign three of these hombres drifted in. That leaves one still to account for."

Clegg darkened and moved awkwardly. He said briefly, "I turned him back."

"Toting his ear?" McGrady demanded. That had been the agreement among the scattered ranchers.

"Well, wishing to gawdamighty he'd never drifted here," Clegg growled.

McGrady's hard gaze probed him. "You ain't getting soft on us, Clegg?" he asked truculently.

Comminger cleared his throat and threw in his two cents. He said, "I reckon Clegg is a man who will back up anything he agrees to and has proved it—which is more than some can boast!"

McGrady swung back to his drink with a growl. "I proved myself in '34!" he grated. "But any hombre looks to me like he stood under the red banner, I'd chop off more his ear and feel decent for it. These hombres ain't even savages—they're something that crawls!"

There was no disputing that, Clegg thought. There was no disputing the need or rightness for any rancher's cruelty. The deserters were, if anything, more sneaking than the outlaws Santa Anna sent in. There was only one way to keep them both out, and that was to send back visible evidence that it was a tough unhealthy country for snakes north of the Nueces.

A poker game started, men drifted in and out on errands, and all settled down to make the most of argument and talk and good company and liquor. This was the whole settlement, the whole range, in total here tonight: seventy-two men, counting ancients and boys down to the age of ten. A top of thirty-seven fighting men at best to hold a wilderness the size of Maryland against Comanche to the north, Santa Anna to the south, and whatever just plain mean, no-good outlaws drifted in amongst them. There was no way to take life easy in this country. It was shoot first or get shot; act first and ask after; if you fought a man at all, beat him or cripple him so ruthlessly he would not return some night to rob you or harm your woman or ambush you.

All that ran through Clegg's mind and with it, under it, shimmering through it, the eternal question: Why? Why put up with the merciless heat and killing droughts and rawness and privation, and crazy, wild ladino stock, and no market when you've raised it? Why put up with it when there was plenty of good land elsewhere that wasn't crowded out?"

But it wasn't just himself alone. None of these men had a grudge against civilization. Few had anything to forget or be forgotten for. All were men whose vitality and unbounded fight and energy would have made them successful in a more civilized community. Yet all had somehow drifted to this land, and they all stuck.

Doc Comminger came in from a stroll and gave him a sly dig and chuckled privately, "Congratulations!"

"What for?" Clegg grunted, not understanding the statement.

Doc teetered back upon his heels to survey him. "She ain't told you yet? Well, mebbe she wanted me to tell her first for sure."

"What?" Clegg repeated, but knowing damned well and his voice holding a wild whoop. He turned scarlet and pranced like a colt. "What are they, doc, boys or gals?"

"Well, wait a minute, young fella," Comminger growled. "In fact, you'll be waiting quite a spell to find that out, and ain't you biting off a purty big hunk, making it plural, first trip out?"

"Well, hell," Clegg growled. Then he grinned. "Hell, no! Ain't this Texas?"

HE STOOD his drinks and the rounds of hearty digging and good-natured jokes, and sank back under the invariable boasting of older papas while they did their strutting. But here was the thing that roped and threw a man in his feelings. This wasn't just *his* luck, it was something shared in by every man there, old and young. It was a feather in the cap of this whole settlement, something every damned one of them would gladly fight and die for. Even men with whom he'd had a misunderstanding or falling out were full of grins and, in this matter, solidly his friends.

Maybe Doc Comminger sized up the

spirit best when he raised his glass and waited for silence with a grin, but with a gravity at its core, and toasted, "A boy for Clegg Marion. A new man for Texas—and a whole damned family for Gonzales!" which was the settlement.

There was a core-deep, heartfelt cheer, rambunctious but full of honest feeling. The toast was something that had a personal meaning to each man; it was something that struck at the roots of each one's pride and manhood, and the reason for his being here. Another man of Texas!

Two men came up and found their awkward, prideful way of letting him know they were ready to drop misunderstandings and let by-gones be by-gones. McGrady dragged up the subject of gotching the Santa Anna spies that day, and openly commended Clegg for both his fighting heart and the self-control it took for a man hot and rancorous with fight to turn a gutting into a gotching.

Lanky Tallis talked with him about rotating some of their combined stock at various water holes and graze. And Scotty Picton, of whom it was said that you could part his scalp from him easier than a nickel, spur dragged over to stand a drink and settle fifty per cent of a debt he had not been asked for.

That was what the coming of a white child meant in these early days of a forming Texas. Kings might be born elsewhere, but nobody was born as big or rich or tough as the poorest Texan—and the whole Lone Star would back that up!

As it went at the saloon, so it would be over at the general store, Clegg thought. She'll be the center of attention the whole month through. He grinned. Women-folk will come fifteen miles to give her advise and counsel, and bring her the latest gossip, dandied up a mite. She'll forget the loneliness, the harshness of the country when she feels close to the women who've been through it.

But going home she gave no sign of softness. Something deep within her had turned glacial. On the rim of a coulee she spoke for the first time.

She didn't turn; she spoke straight ahead out of the shuttered shadows of her bonnet. "That was no cow that horned your arm today, Clegg, was it?" she asked leadenly.

He quirmed. "Well. . . ."

"That's all I wanted to hear," she said without a ripple in the even chill of her tone.

He reached her hand with his big, rope-calloused paw. He muttered urgently, "Mary, you just don't understand!"

"I understand," she told him straightly, "that this land's turned you savage as the Comanches who should own it, Clegg!"

She turned to him then; turned with a cold mask of determination on her face. and quietly withdrew her hand from his. "I'll tell you this now, Clegg, so that later you won't say it's a woman's tantrums: I'll never let my child be born on this brutal soil. Not if I have to walk alone clean across the Red!"

She left no room for argument, no slightest nick into which he could find a word to edge. She had put a terrible barrier of judgment down between them. Her husband and the land had become one within her feelings and she could see no difference between the wilderness and the men who came there any more than you could separate a man and his skin.

A FREAK heat wave struck, and daily now day's stifling heat clung later into the long yellow twilights. Grass burned down to the roots until the ground looked swept and bare, and dust built up into electric thunderheads with never a drop of rain. The sky turned to a churned sea of angry heat that sucked the water out of tanks and turned creek beds into checkered hardpan. The cattle turned ornery and loco and their bawls were like the groan of a tortured hell at sundown, and the thunder of stampedes was a pulsing danger on the air almost every day and every night now.

A few reckless Comanche had drifted down for horse stealing and whatever trouble they could brew, such as starting brush and sod fires. Every few days strange riders would drift across the horizon and sometimes stop with wild stories of Santa Anna's glory, power and cruelty. But less and less did they stop to spread their lies, and more and more they circled the grim fighting and hunting men of Gonzales who would trail a man a hundred miles to gotch him and

turn him back southward across the Nueces for the ridicule and scorn of his fellows.

But Santa Anna was far from men's minds in the grim, relentless struggle for water that came with a dry winter. Then of a sudden the bulging dust clouds that rolled across the sky at even tide turned out to hold wafer and simply dumped it. Everywhere on the range cattle were being caught and drowned by cloudbursts, and no trail was safe to travel that ran up a gorge or between walls. Then came the cold ripping winds of late winter, and the perilous icings and thaws of an early spring, and with them came more serious talk of Santa Anna; talk from Texans who could be counted on.

In February Sam Houston sat north on the Red, a general of an army but without the power to give orders, and the legislature still debated what authority to give him. Word came from the south that Santa Anna had actually started north. Few believed that, but a possibility existed that he might send a few raiding parties through. The volunteer garrison at Goliad had been strengthened to four hundred men and by three cannon, and over at San Antonio de Bexar, Bowie and Bonham and Travis and the Kentuckian, Crockett, were ready to hole up and hold the Alamo.

Texas was full of hell and spleen and independence, but it was also still full of cattle and this was a time of year when cattle needed tending. "If that damned halfcaste were any gentleman," Doc Comminger would rumble, "he'd make a deal to hold things off until after the spring shakedown!"

"What spring?" Mary Marion would ask with her metallic tone and chill bitterness of the land. "What kind or gentle thing did Texas ever know? Even the sun down here kills the little flowers and the clouds don't rain but bring whole seas to drown the cattle!"

Doc would fall silent and wait to get Clegg outside and explain her mood, as doctors will. But a hard, taut look had grown in Clegg's eyes, for he knew something Doc Comminger did not: there was no difference in his wife's feelings for the raw and windswept land, and him. In her eyes, both were equally hateful.

In mid-February Doc said to Clegg, "Well, I'd say you'll be buying cigars in about twenty days now, Clegg, and by looks of the weather, we'll smoke 'em on spring shakedown."

Clegg Marion gave a man's half absent, half tight grin, but his eyes were narrowed northward with a hard strain in them. "Twenty days, eh?" he repeated. "Well, now, Doc, you've likely heard this from a hundred snorting fathers, but I'm going to bet that day means something to Texas, and just so you can haze me on it, I'm going to write it down and seal it, and you can open it in front of all the boys right on the dot of 20th sundown."

CHAPTER THREE

Red Butcher's Challenge

HE MOVED inside and found a pencil stub and sheet of paper and laboriously scrawled a missive dated twenty days ahead,

All CM buildings, spread and live stock to be sold to settle debts and what is left to be used for powder and shot for the men who fight for Texas if I am not back then.

Clegg Marion.

He sealed it, handed it to Doc with a hard smile, and watched him jog off into the sundown. He stood a long space without moving and then he turned and walked back in and stood with his hands locked behind his back without looking at his wife.

"Next week," he said, "the trails should be passable northward and I'll take you up beyond the Red for yore time."

Once, she would have smiled with appreciation. Now there was no solitary change of expression or of feeling, in her. Her eyes were hard and dark and molten. "I'll not deceive you, Clegg," she told him. "I don't mean ever to come back."

The tone of her voice dropped down into his feelings with the sound of a boulder falling into a deep black pit. He gripped himself . . . it took long moments for him to answer.

He asked then without looking at her, "How can anyone hate a piece of land, Mary? Mebbe it's me you hate."

"It's what it's done to you," she told him. "You weren't a savage in Virginia."

His lips compressed and hard lines pulled out from the corners of his eyes. He had been born in Virginia, but Texas had become his home and native heath. Maybe she had sensed something he had not seen in himself . . . this land was his life; in its way, it held a part of him almost as much as she did.

"It's nothing but cruel, relentless, savage wilderness," she said. "But you think more of it than you do of me!"

He shook his head with denial, but there was no explaining a thing to a woman that she could not feel and see and so he held his peace. He drove to town to fetch out Madre Gomez to tend his wife. When he came back, there was a hard quiet of decision in him and he handed his wife a letter from Virginia.

His mother had left him a small place back along Bull Run, and the letter from the bank said it had been worked since then and was ready to move onto.

The glacial hardness dropped from his wife's eyes and she put out her hand to him for the first time in these long months. "Clegg!" she murmured fervently. "We'll go back to where the grass is green and leave this harsh brute country!"

He squeezed her shoulders with awkward gentleness and did not let her see the tight look in his eyes. "We'll start next week," he told her.

BUT next morning the old iron alarm beat out its rusty note from town and ranchers smoked in to hear that Santa Anna had really moved into their land. Moved in with an army of the jail scum he had liberated for the purpose, and had dropped his blood red banner of *No quarter!* from the church tower in San Antonio de Bexar. Now all that stood between the bloody dictator and that whole section of Texas was sick Bowie, holding the Alamo with a puny garrison of a hundred and fifty men.

"Sam Houston will get there in time!" the ranchers declared grimly. "The legislature will have to give him authority to march now!"

But that was a faith, a hope, a prayer that was not answered, and by common impulse the ranchers moved their families

into the settlement. It was hard to swallow for these lean-jawed, hard-eyed fighting men, but they were half licked now, before they'd even fought, by their family responsibilities.

There was a day of relief with the news that half the garrison at Goliad had moved out to aid the Alamo, but right on top of it, the sickening shock of further news: Goliad had been short of supplies and bickering had set in among the men, and the volunteers had turned back when their cannon broke down a few miles out.

"Five thousand reeling, drunken murderers that fancy gold-braided half breed got circling the Alamo!" the next gaunt-eyed courier told them. "And Bowie half dead with fever! He needs help."

"What word from Houston?" Comminger asked the rider.

A sick look crossed his face, and for a space, pride and loyalty to Houston fought with his anger at the legislature before he spoke. "He sent word by Bonham who got back through the lines: Hold the Alamo at any cost! He is trying to get there. But that ain't much to give heart for the hundred and fifty men looking out at five thousand bayonets, with the Red Butcher drawing up his cannon!"

The courier bolted a huge meal, and drank, and wasted no time, but pounded out on a fresh horse to warn the other settlements. Give victory to Santa Anna and every ranch and woman in the Nueces country would go to his blood-crazed rabble.

Doc Comminger waited clean to the settling of the rider's dust before he spoke. "This ain't no time to take chances," he said gruffly.

"We don't even know Bowie will make a stand if Houston don't get there quick," McGrady growled.

"There ain't nothing holding any man here at all," Doc went on harshly. "Except that what a man's got right here in stock and ranch is most of what he's spent his life building."

"I'd risk sticking on my own," Lanky Tallis allowed grimly. "But I ain't risking it for my woman and young ones."

Doc Comminger looked at them one by one and nodded. "I reckon that's about what every man here feels. So I say, get a wagon train started north for

the Red. Get the women and young ones started out. Them that wants can stay here alone to watch their interests, and the old can stay here to help out. They ain't long for this world anyhow if worse comes to worse, and if Houston reaches the Alamo in time, the old folks will be on hand here to help out when the spring break comes."

Doc broke off and looked at Clegg and then dropped his gaze, but spoke directly to him. "Clegg," he grunted, "this is yore first born and you've done more than yore share of fighting Santa Anna already. I don't reckon there's any man here would lift his voice agi'n naming you as wagonmaster to get the train through. Mebbe you'll even get back in time for spring shakedown."

Clegg Marion came out of some deep funk of introspection with a jerk, and looked at Doc with a puzzled expression as if he hadn't even understood the generous offer. "What happens if Houston is on the way, but Bowie quits the Alamo before he knows it for want of a little heart and cheer?"

Doc's teeth ground and he made a man's harsh, embattled gesture. "Then there'll be no freedom for Texas."

Clegg nodded slowly as if to himself. "Then every damned thing we've done, every heartbreak and grief we've fought to live through, goes for nothing in any case?"

He hitched at his belts with sudden energy. His lean chest arched and clear decision came into his face. "Well, hell, let's get the wagon train rolling and then ride like the devil!"

"Ride?" Doc repeated without understanding.

"What else?" Clegg growled. "It ain't no great distance to San Antonio. We'll be back for spring shakedown with necklaces of Santa Anna's buttons and grinding his bayonets down for skinning knives."

THere was an instant's dead silence while the thought soaked in, then McGrady slapped his hip and let out a whoop. "Hell, if a pa-to-be who ain't seen his first whelp yet can say that, that should be good enough for the rest of us!" he roared.

ILL LIVE—AND DIE—FOR TEXAS!

Each man there grinned and nodded agreement with this way to settle things.

"Why, we got a damned army here!" Comminger chuckled. "Thirty-seven men of Gonzales is damned near enough to save the Alamo in itself!"

"Thirty-seven Texans, and more from every two-shack settlement," Clegg nodded. "One of the ancients can get the wagon train through safe enough. Every Comanche in between will be skulking the fringes of the show at San Antonio!"

There was no doubt in any of them now. Their women safe, their prides saved and their ranches to come back to—and the fun of chasing Santa Anna out. What more could a Texan want? Every man there was hollering and swaggering and full of hell and brimstone right this minute except Clegg, who had brought their rankling confusion to a clear head, and who now went out alone and stern of countenance.

For a space he stood on the stoop with the riotous noise from behind a back-ground for his somber thoughts, watching the store where most of the women were gathered and feeling the churn of conflicting thoughts inside him.

He thought of Virginia as it had been when he was young, and then he thought that he had come here and never wanted to go back, and except for his wife, would not even have entertained the idea. He wouldn't have been happy there in any case, and a man making a compromise against his feelings could well turn as harsh and cruel as his wife accused him of being now.

Maybe she'd see that after she got there. In any case, she would see that he couldn't run out now, and maybe in the course of what he meant to do he was helping in his small way to make Texas a better place, a safer and kinder place, for other young couples in the future.

But he couldn't face her to say that; he did not know that he could find words even if he did. So he sent a message of what he meant to do and got his horse and rode out to his ranch alone, finding Manueto loyally there.

He said to the boy, "Manueto, you will go north as far to the Red with Doña Maria and keep her safe."

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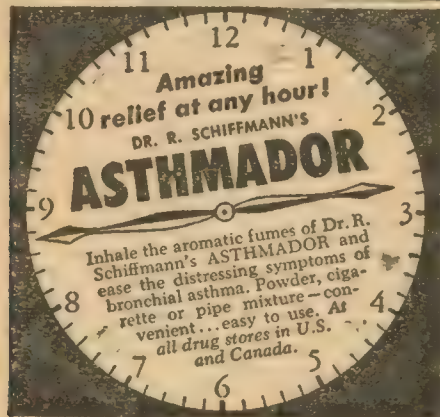
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DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

The boy fought down his burning disappointment. "I cannot ride with you to the Alamo, Don Clegg?"

"You are my right hand," Clegg told him. "I am sending you see my wife through."

"Sí, señor, she will be safe," the boy promised, feeling both hurt and pride at the same time, but seeing that Clegg must be feeling much more so, and was putting in him his greatest trust.

IT WAS late when the crunch of wheels on gravel sounded in the courtyard and Madre Gomez helped Mary Marion from the buckboard. Fierce hungers surged through Clegg. Surely, she had come to tell him at this last moment that she understood?

But she drew aside from his helping hand. She came of herself into the big low room with her heavy step and labored breathing, and she turned in the light to look at him with all the fire of a woman's disillusionment and outrage.

"So you chose a chance for violence against taking me back to civilization and security?" she challenged. "Clegg, you're wicked! You've turned hard and cruel and unfeeling as this awful land!"

"Mary—" he started, then saw the flintlike set of her jaw and could feel icy barriers of misunderstanding clean across the room. He spread his hands.

"Texas did this to you!" she cried shrilly. "I hate the smell of Texas!" and with a blazing look she slammed the door of her room.

He stood rooted where he was until the new day began to stir the airs and the sky was pitch for want of stars. Then he loaded his warbag and left his worn signet ring for his wife upon the table, and after another aching wait, moved out to his horse and rode to the settlement, and within the hour rode with Comminger at the head of thirty-six men of Gonzales—the loneliest man in all of Texas.

On the brow of the first grade the men looked back with their fierce churn of feelings at the lights still burning for them against the sliding shadows of a blue-gray dawn.

Comminger drew a deep lungful of the soft air about him and gave a grim smile.

PLL LIVE—AND DIE—FOR TEXAS!

"We'll have to pour 'em into hell in a hurry, Clegg," he allowed. "Spring's breaking with this morning."

His gaze sharpened suddenly and he sensed out the other man. "Here, Clegg, you're not losing heart?"

"No!" Clegg clipped. To himself he thought, I lost it when she slammed the door.

* * *

All night long Madre Gomez had waited hopefully for tears to ease the raging ache in Mary's breast, but Clegg's wife sat in front of her small fireplace as immovable as stone. Now, with the spread of light into her room, she got up suddenly and tore a silhouette of herself and Clegg from its frame and hurled it savagely at the low fire.

"Texas!" she breathed. "How could Clegg do this to me?"

She moved to the patio door and threw it open as if the thought crowded the room and choked her.

Day's first light was filtering down into the patio and she stood there staring out, transfixed. The raw harsh smell of dusty, half burned earth was gone. The morning air was warm and moist and gentle and threaded with the most delicate scents of bursting spring. Color formed out of the paling, fluid shadows and came at her like the smells: big, brilliant patches of color, and trailing lines of feathery whites and yellows and clusters of lavenders and blues around the splashing crimson of yuccas.

She took a step back and her face went bloodless and she squeezed her eyes with disbelief of what she saw. "Madre Gomez," she breathed hollowly, "where did this color and gentleness come from?"

"It is Texas in spring," the wise old woman said. "It is the words to the song of Texas heart, doña."

"No!" Mary Marion cried suddenly. "It is a trick! Those were special plants he had brought in!"

She wheeled and ran through the house and threw open the front door, and stared out at a rolling sea of flowers that thickened even as she looked. Nothing in all that endless space was any longer harsh. Birds . . . ten million songbirds were

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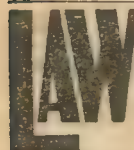
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DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

singing out of the flushing golds of a rising sun.

She stood there, catching the beauty, the pulse of the land, for the first time, numbed by the shock of realization that there was nothing here cruel and brutal to change a man, but on the contrary something so good and clean it was worth fighting for. It was worth dying for if need be.

She leaned heavily back against the doorway, eyes stark with sudden sight of what this meant. She had been jealous of the land because a love of it was something she had not understood Clegg wanted or could ever share with her. She had never seen it as anything but stark and harsh and drab.

Now she saw the other thing, that it was something a woman could love; that it was something to share. A place to build and raise a family. And he had tried to show her that so hard, and she remembered his efforts at his explaining, his awkward and clumsy attempts at kindness, such as building and planting the patio.

SUDDEN fierce contrition filled her and she called out, "Manuelo!" and rushed to the place where she kept her silver.

He came in with a rush, worry on his boyish face. "Manuelo, you can overtake Don Clegg?" she demanded.

"Sí, doña, by the time the coyote sings, mebbe."

She stopped her frantic search and looked at him, his phrase striking through her confusion like a clear, sweet, quieting sound. A coyote *singing!* He had not meant howling. But singing, singing at the moon.

Well, why not? It could be song as well as a howl if it was the song of the beautiful country.

"Here," she murmured, eyes filling now with bright golden lights behind their dampness. She pushed the treasured heirloom knife and silver teapot into his hands. "Catch Don Clegg and tell him I send him the pot to melt for Texan bullets and the knife to—to—" She halted, took a deep breath and let the fierce word ring forth, "To scalp Santa Anna!"

I'LL LIVE—AND DIE—FOR TEXAS!

She had a sudden twinge and clapped a hand to her side. Madre Gomez rushed forward to take her into ready, waiting arms.

Mary Marion was gray now, breathing hard, with only two bright patches of color on her face, but the luminous light of her eyes held the boy's attention entirely.

"And tell him I send my heart, Manuelo, and that I will have a son—A Texan son—waiting. . . ."

"Sí, doña!" the boy whispered, awed by the great surge of love he could feel flow through her but could not understand.

"Sí," he kept repeating as he rode with Clegg's dust in his nostrils, and the awe was still in him as he sent his shrill call racking in and dusted into night camp with the coyote's first lift of his spring song.

"Sí, Don Clegg," he murmured but a few moments later with awe and eagerness all through him at the good news he bore. "She was very well and very strong—and very beautiful, like gold churchbells, señor!"

"God, listen to that!" Clegg chuckled with a surge of fierce pride that struck down the uncertainty and grumbling that had begun to set into the men. "A son—a Texan son, she said—to fight and kill for!"

And that son was his, but it held the magic of something more, a Texan son, as she'd said, and in that way something that belonged to all of them, and held in its magic those indefinable but heart-deep things that every man was eager to fight, and ready to die, for.

Clegg kissed the hilt of the knife and held it up against the cross of morning's star. "They'll remember that knife when they tell about the Alamo!" he roared to the heavens.

And at dawn they rode out to give heart and aid to Bowie's dispirited men, breaking Santa Anna's lines to reach the fortified yard with such fierce and savage yells that later they were to echo clean through Texas, and all the land in that wild grim call of freedom, "Remember the Alamo!"

THE END

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(Continued from page 79)

he' held, still shaken by the morning's business.

"It's all mixed up, Ira. Duffy and I were over at Manzanita Spring last night figuring out a new wolf camp. Danged if we didn't find a can of gold pieces somebody'd hid there! Duff put it in his money belt and right about that time a gang of men—I guess they were outlaws—jumped us. We took off. Nobody said 'Halt!' or 'We're deppties,' or anything. Just started shooting!" He paused, scowling over the memory.

Mulcare began to redden. "Duff dropped one of them," Tom said, "and I took him on my bronc after they killed his. Then he got the idea it might be bad luck to stay around. He stole my horse this morning and rode over here to swap for a fresh one. I came along in time to stop it. I wasn't going to have Uncle Red saddled with aiding and abetting."

He smoked thoughtfully and said, "I guess I could sue somebody for firing at me, couldn't I? Scared me out of ten year's cowpunchin'."

The cowpunchers were smiling, though Derrick was steaming up. But Sheriff Mulcare rubbed his unshaven jaws, rough as the back of a flitch of bacon.

"Don't know but what you could," he frowned. "A good place to start might be with the estate of Coke Shepley. I don't know whether he left any heirs or not. But get your claim in for about ten thousand, quick! Maybe you'll walk off with a chunk of EX. I'll testify for you Tom. You see, I—I was in that bunch. It was us."

Rae said, "No! Why, Sheriff, it's not like you!"

Mulcare began to smile, chuckling then and saying, "It ain't, ain't it?" He looked around at the others. "Reckon you could use a bait before we go back, hey?"

The boys thought they could.

It was a noisy society of half-starved men in the cabin, gathered around a big oak table smoking with coffee and tobacco and golden pancakes. Tom noticed that Rae was flushed but happy.

It was a small point, but an important one, for a man who intended to be feeding quite a crew of punchers one of these days.

THE END

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The Editor

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